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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF KIERKEGAARD'S ETHICAL STAGE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

by

THOMAS WRIGHT GOODENOUGH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Social Relevance of Kierkegaard's Ethical Stage, submitted by Thomas Wright Goodenough in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Kierkegaard's Ethical Stage as it is described in the pseudonymous literature, and suggests the possibility of extending it along lines not explored by Kierkegaard. It also attempts to present a unified account of the Ethical Stage and to indicate how it points toward complex social relationships.

The first chapter attempts to clarify the fundamentals of the Ethical Stage, largely through an examination of Ethical choice and the realization of universals. It deals with the rise of the Ethical Stage, and contrasts its nature with that of the Aesthetic Stage.

The second chapter attempts to trace the upper limits of the Ethical Stage through an examination of Kierkegaard's discussion of despair in the Ethical, and the central aspects of the Religious Stage. In this chapter it was found necessary to depart from a direct interpretation of Kierkegaardian texts in order to bring a more radical criticism to bear up on Kierkegaard's development of the stages.

The third chapter builds on the critical position established in the previous chapter, using a "sample" case to test the emphasis due to certain major points in the analysis. This is done with a view to suggesting that a point of departure for a secular social analysis of human relationships may be found in Kierkegaard's Ethical Stage.



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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an attempt to discover and indicate the importance of the independently valuable contents of the Ethical Stage, as described by Kierkegaard in the pseudonymous works. Such an undertaking inevitably involves an examination of areas which would appear to many who are familiar with the works of Kierkegaard and the commentaries upon them as unpromising for further consideration. I attempt to present the viewpoint of one who, although impressed with Kierkegaard's achievement in the pseudonymous works, is unable to travel the whole road with him, but who none the less derives philosophical support and satisfaction from many of the materials presented by him in these works.

This undertaking, it should be admitted at the outset, is a somewhat perilous one since it involves the "beheading" of a descriptive system. It is my contention, however, that the "headless" body will be found not only to have survived, but even to be vigorous. With this admission as to the nature of the present enterprise it is prudent to make a number of observations about the nature of Kierkegaard's stages which, although apparently introductory, are something more than a mere ceremonial bow. These observations serve to underline the difference between the stages as understood on the overall view, and the stages understood as the reader first makes contact with and is influenced by them. It is the latter viewpoint which is of central interest for present purposes, but the former can never be entirely forgotten since



it is over against the former that the latter must be shown to be viable. It must be acknowledged that Kierkegaard scholars such as David Swenson and James Collins have been impressed with the structure of the stages taken as a whole, and with the explanatory range of all three of the stages taken together.<sup>1</sup> Both of these critics approach the non-aesthetic works from the point of view of this three-stage model (which includes the two intermediate stages of irony and humor).

On the other hand, the separate stages, as discovered in turn by the reader are impressive, plausible, and convincing. Were this not the case, Kierkegaard's project, that of leading the reader to become a Christian, could not succeed. It would seem that, if there are good reasons to be impressed with the stages as discovered in turn, then one might well be justified in adopting the earlier stage independently of the later one. It seems clear that Kierkegaard expected his readers to do this sort of thing<sup>2</sup> and felt that such adoption of the earlier stages favored his project.

It should be observed that, when first read, each stage presents an independent demand which is voided in the act of going beyond it, even though the stage itself persists and plays an important part in interpretation from the higher level.<sup>3</sup> It follows, then, that it should be possible to take each stage by itself as a valuable, if

<sup>1</sup>David Swenson, Something About Kierkegaard (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1945), p. 129; and James Collins, The Mind of Kierkegaard (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup>S. A. Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments, trans. David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 251.

<sup>3</sup>S. A. Kierkegaard, Either/Or, trans. D. F. & L. M. Swenson (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), in 2 vols., Vol. II, p. 17f.



partial statement about the human condition. One may, therefore, after making proper acknowledgment of Kierkegaard's overall intention, go on to examine the stages independently and draw out their individual implications. This is quite in line with Kierkegaard's own wish that each phase might be made clear by itself. Kierkegaard even admits to limiting certain aspects of the pseudonymous works to facilitate comprehension at this level.<sup>1</sup> Such understanding would, of course, best serve Kierkegaard's purposes in his attempt at indirect communication.<sup>2</sup>

The project that Kierkegaard ventures upon in the pseudonymous works depends upon its descriptive plausibility. What is being communicated must conform to the reader's experience. This is not to say that it is addressed only to such colorful characters as the young man of the first volume of Either/Or. The average Aesthete will be, by comparison, a fairly humdrum fellow. The important thing for Kierkegaard was to create a character interesting enough to serve a literary purpose who, nonetheless embodies the attitudes and errors of the reader. In this way Kierkegaard is able to make contact with living experience, and in fact, depends on life to assist in moving the reader through the stages. He expects the reader to take the material over and apply it.

A further obvious point which should be mentioned here "for the record" is that it must be remembered that the Ethical Stage is not about ethical theory, but about the conditions under which ethical theory is adopted. The Ethical Stage does not recommend a system of ethics, and the problem here is not that of separating the ethical

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<sup>1</sup>Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup>As described, for example, in Postscript, pp. 70-74.



content of Kierkegaard's philosophy from the other aspects of that philosophy. The distinctions which must be made for present purposes are between the stages themselves.

In practice it is extremely difficult to discuss any one stage in complete isolation from the others. There is a sense in which the stages act as each other's boundaries. In Kierkegaard's explanation the positions of irony and humor are interposed between the stages, but this isn't much help as, in the case of irony for example, the ironist may well turn out to be an Ethicist.<sup>1</sup> One may conclude, then, that the boundaries of a given stage are marked out by the range of the categories of the adjacent stage or stages. Since the present project is to uncover the independently valuable elements of the Ethical Stage, particularly with a view to drawing out some of its implications for social theory, a certain amount of discussion of the Aesthetic and Religious Stages is inevitable.

The first stage and major part of this thesis is the isolation and identification of materials which belong distinctively and exclusively to the Ethical Stage, and extrapolation where possible to indicate some of the ways in which these materials affect social theory. That these materials will have consequences in this area is apparent when it is remembered that the ethical mood relates to a special sort of activity--realization of the universal, which in turn has consequences for persons other than the self.

The upper limits of the Ethical are examined next. There appears to be an area in which the Ethical Man encounters difficulties and

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<sup>1</sup>Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 448.



problems. The examination of such limits may provide further useful insights into the nature of the Ethical Stage. Finally, an attempt to discover the applicability of the principles obtained in the preceding sections of the thesis may be shown to reveal the basis for social commentary provided by the Ethical Stage.

It is a common charge against Kierkegaard that he lacks social insight, and that his philosophy offers no basis for a concept of the community. This charge is to be countered with a demonstration that Kierkegaard has not, in fact, failed at this level. His approach leads to an understanding of interpersonal relationships so radically different from that of his critics that a sweeping new outlook has been mistaken for conservatism.



# CHAPTER I

## THE AESTHETIC STAGE AND THE ETHICAL STAGE

### (A) The Ethical Choice

The nature and significance of the ethical choice can only be understood in the light of the stage which precedes the Ethical--the Aesthetic Stage. Unfortunately it is difficult to describe concisely, as it admits of more variation and instability than any other stage. Kierkegaard provides many specific examples for purposes of illustration, and it is not easy to draw out common characteristics even though the general intention is quite clear to the attentive reader.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard's preference for somewhat flamboyant illustrative characters adds to the difficulties. The important characteristics of the Aesthetic Stage must have very general applicability. The following generalizations are intended to indicate some of the major features of this stage.

The Aesthetic Stage is characterized by chance. As illustrated by Johannes the Seducer, for example, significance belongs to the moment, all else being delusion.<sup>2</sup> The consequence of such a position is a radical instability. Much is made of this in the second volume of Either/Or where the accidental nature of the experiences which appeal to the young man is made clear.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>As, for example, in the opening section of Stages on Life's Way.

<sup>2</sup>Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Vol. I, p. 427.

<sup>3</sup>As, for example, Either/Or, Vol. II, pp. 7ff.



The Aesthete, as depicted by Kierkegaard, is bound to current taste in either a positive or negative way. Various degrees of this dependence are illustrated in the opening section of Stages on Life's Way. The positive side may be exemplified by the "young man" who is in search of opportunities to heighten his sensitivity and refine his taste, and the negative by the Ladies' Tailor who is primarily concerned with the perversion of current taste for his own profit and amusement. This dependence on transient and externally derived (in the sense of the individual taking over values and attitudes developed by others) styles and interests, taken together with the concentration on the moment indicate a weak concept of the self--what Kierkegaard calls the "fortuitous individual".<sup>1</sup> The young man who supposedly is the author of the first volume of Either/Or is such a character. He is intelligent, capable, and talented. He plays on current tastes and interests very skilfully. It is significant, however, that he is not represented as producing a unified volume on a single theme. This would be contrary to the sort of character that Kierkegaard is concerned to reveal in him. The first volume is not really a serious book, just as the character of its putative author is not really serious. The Aesthete milks a situation for its immediate interest but does not persist in it. So it is with the young man of this first volume who wanders happily from the precious Diapsalmata to the sardonic Seducers Diary.

The Aesthete, in catering to styles and interests relevant to the moment, deprives himself of understanding, just as the husband described

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<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 215.



in the second volume of Either/Or in turning his married life into a happy mystification destroyed its basis in the joint understanding of the two partners.<sup>1</sup> The Aesthete, at least in the earlier portions of his experience within this stage, as in the Don Juan type for example is primarily concerned with happiness or enjoyment at one level or another. He expects to find it outside himself and grasp it in some appropriate way. This is another aspect of the problem arising from the Aesthete's weak concept of the self. As Kierkegaard notes, the Aesthete in his effort to "enjoy life always posits a condition which either lies outside the individual or is in the individual in such a way that it is not posited by the individual himself."<sup>2</sup>

Convenience is of prime importance for the Aesthete. The happiness or unhappiness which he experiences is real enough but the foundation for it is curiously naive. He clings to the "appropriate" but usually fails to examine the standard of appropriateness, simply taking over what comes to hand. To take the example of the Aesthete of literary pretensions; he gives little recognition to the fact that the appropriateness of a given action is not always to be judged in the light of novel X, poem Y, or monograph Z. He spends his time ringing the changes on current tastes, at one moment embracing them, at the next contradicting them as banal, and occasionally making a show of wit in demonstrating that some unlikely action may be reconciled with one approach or the other.

No solid values underlie the technical performance of the

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 116 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 184. Italics Kierkegaard's.



Aesthete. Current tastes are, in a sense artificial and, in the same sense the Aesthete is artificial in as far as he is dependent upon them.<sup>1</sup> This leaves the Aesthete in serious difficulties whenever his understanding is put to a serious test.

The Aesthete floats from one state of affairs to the next. His enthusiasms and activities are all provisional, and because of this he never gets to the heart of anything he undertakes.<sup>2</sup> In this situation it is difficult even to say who or what the Aesthete is. To put it another way, when we say "He floats", it is difficult to say just what it is that is doing the floating. In this condition the individual has become a function of the moment without personal extension or identity apart from it. The Aesthete could himself be described as a bundle of accidents.

The search for enjoyment is not without consequences even within the bounds of the Aesthetic Stage. The Young Man of the first volume of Either/Or is as much concerned with Faust as with Don Juan although he spends less time actually discussing Faust. He sees them as being directly related to each other.<sup>3</sup> The Aesthete must face boredom, but lacks the reserves to do so successfully. He is the antithesis of the knight of infinite resignation who is able to carry on in the face of the commonplace uninteresting interminable daily round with composure

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 164 ff. The Judge is pointing out to the Young Man that his position is not equal to his own demand for seriousness in some contexts because of this basic weakness.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 169 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Either/Or, Vol. I, pp. 88, 89.



and enthusiasm.<sup>1</sup> Like Nero he is bound to seek the pleasures of the moment, and like Nero he lives with disappointment and increasing dissatisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

Faust is a bored man taking refuge in experimentation in an attempt to escape the claustrophobia induced by the consciousness of limited possibility. As Kierkegaard points out in a Journal entry, Faust isn't particularly interested in sin but only in discovering new possibilities.<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard's claim is that however successful in his endeavors the Aesthete may be, he must in the end reflect upon what he has achieved and upon his desires and will be dissatisfied. The transitory, once it is revealed as transitory is unsatisfactory, and the Aesthete, whether he has discovered it as yet or not, is in despair.<sup>4</sup>

In pressing this claim Kierkegaard is not so much handing down a judgment as continuing in the essentially descriptive vein indicated earlier. The reflective examination of goals and values is a familiar human experience which may be triggered by the most inconspicuous of happenings, and may lead to highly significant reappraisal of the self.

Recognition of the fact of boredom and the need for reassessment of his position drives the Aesthete toward a deeper and more general dissatisfaction with his activities. Kierkegaard notes that the

<sup>1</sup> S. A. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling (and Sickness Unto Death) (trans. W. C. Lowrie) (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), pp. 49 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, pp. 189 ff.

<sup>3</sup> The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard, trans. A. Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, pp. 196, 197.



Aesthete can succeed in these activities in a certain sense. He may select an aesthetic objective and pursue it seriously until he attains it. In doing so he achieves an aesthetic success which, evaluated by the standards which he embraces, is a notable achievement. The problem is, in Kierkegaard's terms, that ". . . although the individual becomes, he becomes what he immediately is."<sup>1</sup> These very successes serve to accentuate the Aesthete's realization that he is a "fortuitous individual". His boredom and dissatisfaction relate not to specific projects but to the whole position that he finds himself in. The Aesthetic stage has failed him. In ceasing to give him satisfaction the aesthetic approach undercuts its own basis. Introspection leads to a self knowledge that cannot be adequately treated in the categories of the Aesthetic Stage. The more able the Aesthete is, then, in the practice of the aesthetic , the more clearly he comes to see the inadequacy of the Stage.

The Aesthete suffers from a weakness of judgment. He is not altogether incapable of assessing things. His dissatisfaction is a judgment which, on Kierkegaard's account of the matter, is certainly well founded. His aesthetic sense may be very highly developed, but there remains a sense in which he is incapable of serious contemplation of alternatives. When asked for an opinion as to whether one should act in a certain way, the Young Man is represented as saying that the outcome is the same whether the action is performed or not; either decision will be regretted.<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard is of the opinion that this is evidence

<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 163.



of lack of seriousness.<sup>1</sup> What is lacking in the Aesthete is an understanding of good and evil. The serious either/or which Kierkegaard is proposing is not of the nature of a distinction between good and evil but rather between good and evil and failure or inability to choose.<sup>2</sup> The man who has worked through the possibilities of the Aesthetic Stage, and who, unlike Faust, has no new avenues to explore is not necessarily forced to face choice at once.

A man who has essentially ceased to act on the assumptions of the Aesthetic Stage may move on to the position of Ironist. He does not have this position entirely to himself, as an Ethicist may use it as an incognito, and Kierkegaard is primarily concerned with this latter possibility.<sup>3</sup> For the man who is not an Ethicist in disguise the position of Ironist is a temporary refuge from his dissatisfaction. In it he becomes an observer. He surveys life but has ceased to act as he once did. He has suspended the limited capacity for judgment he formerly enjoyed. Like a camera he records but does not comment for he recognizes that his old basis of judgment no longer satisfies him. His irony arises, it would seem from his recognition that he has a need which cannot be met by the standards that he is familiar with. He is still living "immediately" but is aware of the contradictory position that he finds himself in.<sup>4</sup> It would seem to be humanly impossible to live in this condition for any extended period as the need for something more than has

<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> Postscript, p. 448.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.



been attained would persist and the practical business of living would rule out consistent suspension of judgment. The need to make decisions is not lessened by the lack of a satisfactory base for making them.

The problem remains for the Ironist and must be met. The Aesthetic Stage can no longer offer him support. Irony is only a way of suspending the problem for the non-ethical man.

Kierkegaard rules out the possibility of avoiding boredom through simple activity. It is not enough to lightly advise the bored Aesthete to marry or to involve himself in some activity for the sake of forgetting his boredom. The boredom and melancholy will return in an even worse way if this is attempted.<sup>1</sup> The hard facts of life break up a simple escapism.

Kierkegaard recommends despair rather than provisional involvement.<sup>2</sup> Despair is not limited to the man caught in problems with the Aesthetic, but may occur also with relation to the Ethical and to Religiousness A. It is the same sort of thing in each case but its significance varies according to context. In the "Equilibrium" section of Either/Or, Vol. II, one of the main intentions seems to be to help the Young Man to change his position with relation to the Ethical Stage. Despair as it is spoken of here is not merely a matter of emotional condition but one of a movement. The disappointed Aesthete is still dependent on those structures which he has become dissatisfied with for his understanding of himself and his position. In moving on to despair he gives up this dependence on the Aesthetic, and in doing so frees himself for new kinds of consideration. Despair at this level is not a matter

<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, pp. 211, 212.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 212.



of fact but rather a matter of choice. The Young Man is advised to choose to be free from the attitudes which prevent him from becoming anything more than a "fortuitous individual". Despair is a part of the Young Man's search for himself.<sup>1</sup> It is, in part, an intensification of the dissatisfaction he felt as a bored Aesthete, but it is also a new sort of thing in as far as the choice of despair means a change in the nature of his involvement. The old framework no longer serves the Young Man adequately so he throws it away. A new framework is needed, but nothing in his experience so far assures him that he has only to throw away the old framework to receive a new one. He feels that he needs something but until he attains it he has no knowledge of it beyond the felt need.

In setting up the situation in this way Kierkegaard has closed off the various avenues that reason might seek to employ in framing a new context for self-understanding. The Aesthete when faced with the choice of despair has, from his own point of view, reached a dead end. He is apparently in this position because his reason has failed him. This is, in fact, the case, in that reason cannot furnish him with the means to change the framework that he has been working within. The way out is not through thought but through action. The choice of despair is the required movement in this situation but the appropriateness of it can only be seen in retrospect.

The choice of despair also has a positive side. The choice of despair is not only a moving away from the Aesthetic Stage, but also the postulation of the absolute. The choice is the choice of something, and the something is in this case the self. To choose the self and to choose

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 213.



the absolute are one and the same thing.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard points out that the self, or absolute must exist or it could not be chosen on the one hand, while on the other it does not exist for if it existed independent of the choice of it then the choice would be an illusion.<sup>2</sup> The way out of this particular maze is by way of recognizing that what is chosen in this situation is not one thing among many but the absolute. Kierkegaard argues that there is only one thing which a person can choose absolutely and that is himself in his "eternal validity".<sup>3</sup> Leaving aside the difficult question of what is "eternally valid" for the moment; only the self admits of being chosen absolutely by a person, for to choose something else involves choosing it as a finite thing and hence the choice cannot be made absolutely.<sup>4</sup>

Kierkegaard describes the self which is chosen in choosing despair as both the most abstract and concrete of things. It is freedom.<sup>5</sup> It is in keeping with the positive and negative aspects of the choice of despair that this is "freedom from" with respect to the new possibilities which may now be considered; these are, however, secondary aspects as in the first instance this freedom can only be seen as absolute. Freedom as an absolute is not something which can be exercised. It is only brought into play when made relevant to something else.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Loc.cit.

<sup>4</sup> Loc. cit., also p. 219 and following.

<sup>5</sup> Loc.cit.



The something else is provided in the action of choosing the self for that self is seen as having a history. A man does not create himself in moving to despair, but chooses himself.<sup>1</sup> The self which is chosen has been implicit in all the man's past activities, but the significance of this cannot be understood until after the choice has been made.

It is in the discovery of this history of the self that a man makes his first real contact with his social milieu. In considering the history of the self that he has chosen he discovers that he stands in relation to other people and to people in general. Thus it is that when choosing despair, which seems the most private and isolated of all activities, he is concerned with that which most firmly places him in relation to others.<sup>2</sup>

There is a further difficulty with the history of the self in that in recognizing it he must also recognize that certain actions which he may not approve of form a part of it. These he must accept if he is to accept the self.<sup>3</sup> In choosing despair then one also chooses to evaluate, accept, and where possible do something about the past. The past events themselves cannot be corrected but in some cases it may be possible to make restitution. There is a sense of wasted time involved in understanding this. The feeling is that if possibilities have been overlooked and opportunities neglected then part of life has been lost.

To choose to become a self requires one to take oneself seriously. The charge of lack of seriousness against the Young Man<sup>4</sup> carries weight precisely because he has not chosen himself. His choices of what he is

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.



to be are all finite choices and as such lack seriousness. These choices resemble the wearing of masks. The absolute, on the other hand, clearly cannot be chosen in any way other than seriously.

In the positing of the self by a person the difference between good and evil emerges. For the Aesthete this difference is latent.<sup>1</sup> The Aesthete's differences are all relative differences, while the difference between good and evil is an absolute difference which cannot be understood prior to the absolute choice of the self. Only the self as absolute can choose absolutely.<sup>2</sup> The essential point here is that both good and evil is a part of the self which is chosen.<sup>3</sup> To choose to be a self is to recognize and accept responsibility for both elements.

The choice of the self is the ethical choice in this sense; by it the distinction between good and evil is established. At the same time he who chooses despair is enabled to meet and evaluate situations as a stable individual. He has chosen to be something, as against the situation of the victim of circumstances.

#### (B) How the Universal is Realized

The preceding section dealt with the need for ethical choice, and with the character of ethical choice. Nothing, however, was said about specific content. It is clear that in becoming an ethical man one does not start with a clean sheet, for in making the step to the Ethical one must recognize and accept one's past. The form of self that is chosen is the whole aesthetic self.<sup>4</sup> One cannot simply be arbitrary about the self one chooses. Similarly it is not to be supposed that the actions

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 227.



which the Ethical Man decides to perform depend only upon whim or arbitrary selection.

Kierkegaard does not claim that everything is possible for a man; spiritual possibility he leaves open but in the world of finitude he admits that there is much that is impossible. Insistence on everything as possible is a position he ascribes to fools and young men.<sup>1</sup> Part of the reason for this may be seen in Kierkegaard's treatment of the relationship between freedom and good. It is also to be seen in his treatment of possibility. These two points are independently treated elsewhere.

Good and evil only emerge when chosen, but this does not reduce them to the level of mere subjective distinctions. It is noted that the good as chosen is an absolute chosen by an absolute, and that since this is the case the absolute validity of the distinction between good and evil is affirmed.<sup>2</sup> This absolute distinction really is absolute but it is a freely chosen absolute, the choice of which is only possible for the absolute (as opposed to the finite) self.

It is clear that, on the basis of the material presented by Kierkegaard, man as such is not evil. He is not in a position even to understand evil until he has chosen himself. The Aesthete may be interested in evil, but this is only because evil is generally supposed to be interesting, while good is commonplace. The Aesthete is inclined to suppose that to be evil is to be distinguished.<sup>3</sup> Those who are well

<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 231.



acquainted with evil are notoriously prone to complain of its dullness. Kierkegaard's account of boredom in the Aesthetic Stage seems to account for this very well. For the Aesthete the differences between good and evil are entirely accidental and one may well be as good (or bad) as the other. With the movement to the Ethical this changes. The difference between them is itself seen as absolute. The good however remains a commonplace sort of thing dealing in very general categories.<sup>1</sup>

Good and evil for Kierkegaard are not principles of ethical thought in this context, but have to do with freedom and action. Kierkegaard distinguishes "uncontrolled freedom"<sup>2</sup> from "the genuine positive freedom". The former may include evil while the latter entirely excludes it.<sup>3</sup> This distinction points up the fact that when one freely chooses oneself it is not one set of things as opposed to another that emerges in the choice but what may loosely be called a condition. Actions performed must be in accord with the condition chosen. To be an Ethical man is to be in one sort of condition, while to be positively involved in evil is to be in a condition incompatible with that of Ethical Man. This incompatibility may be seen in at least two contexts: that of seriously choosing oneself, and that of the realization of the universal.

Good and evil, then, are to be understood in relation to freedom; but never to freedom as abstract. The freedom involved is the freedom exercised in choosing oneself. Kierkegaard says that the good cannot be

<sup>1</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>2</sup> "liberum arbitrium", Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 178.



defined and then, at once, says that the good is freedom.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard does not involve himself in the sort of thing that G. E. Moore calls the naturalistic fallacy.<sup>2</sup> He points out that the distinction between good and evil is "for and in freedom" and as such is never abstract.<sup>3</sup> If this is acknowledged it is somewhat difficult to continue the discussion. Admitting the difficulties it is still possible to proceed, albeit with somewhat less rigor than is normally desirable.

Freedom and good go together. Freedom has no meaning apart from its relationship to good. To say that one may freely choose either good or evil is to separate freedom from the good; and to make of it a meaningless abstraction.<sup>4</sup> If this is the case, and if ethical choice is to be serious, then ethically speaking one can only choose the good. To choose evil would be to destroy the freedom with which the choice is made, and hence would not be serious.

This analysis does not deny the possibility of man becoming involved with evil either at the Aesthetic or Ethical levels. Kierkegaard speaks of good and evil as latent in the Aesthetic Stage.<sup>5</sup> Neither good nor evil is actually created in the act of choosing the self, nor does the act of choosing rule out the possibility of subsequent involvement. Kierkegaard says only that freedom becomes more perfect the more it excludes evil.<sup>6</sup> If evil is a condition, as has been suggested, then it

<sup>1</sup> S. A. Kierkegaard, The Concept of Dread, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica, Paperback edition (Cambridge: The University Press, 1959) p. 13 and following.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> The Concept of Dread, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 227.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 178.



remains a possibility for every existing individual. The Aesthetic Man can actually be in this condition even though he is unable to recognize that he is. It is partly the acceptance of the fact of having been involved in evil that presents the major difficulties in choosing oneself.

That evil is a condition incompatible with that of Ethical Man may also be seen in considering the activity of realizing the universal. In realizing the universal the Ethical Man expresses his relationship to humanity as a whole. Kierkegaard links the universal and "the essentially human".<sup>1</sup>

The Ethical Man clearly cannot stop with choosing himself. He is constantly involved in making other, and in some sense, lesser choices. Kierkegaard defines the Ethical as "that by which a man becomes what he becomes".<sup>2</sup> Since this is the case the kind of thing chosen by the Ethical Man is of absolute importance. Ethical Man cannot adopt an experimental approach as experimentalism is for the Ethical Man "what sophistry is in the realm of knowledge".<sup>3</sup> The serious choice of the self excludes any possibility of lack of seriousness in subsequent matters (if the choice of the self is to be preserved). The Ethical Man is characteristically a serious man. He is also an active man for the freedom he has chosen can only be maintained by constantly exercising it.<sup>4</sup>

The constant exercise of serious choice is not to be confused with habit. For the Ethical Man seriousness gives repetition originality.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 91

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>5</sup> The Concept of Dread, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.



Constantine Constantius, the putative author of Repetition, fails in his attempt to attain a new position through repetition because he has not been able to find a proper personal basis for it.<sup>1</sup> He was not approaching repetition as an ethically serious man.

It is extremely likely at the outset that Ethical Man will be involved in at least some repetitive activity since the maintenance of the self requires consistent behavior with respect to continuing situations. Kierkegaard makes this into something more important and more positive. In repetition, considered as distinctively ethical, Ethical Man becomes a full blooded living individual in a real and complex world and at the same time comes into relationship to humanity as a whole (or the race) through realizing the universal.

It has been noted that when one chooses oneself the self has been chosen in its "eternal validity".<sup>2</sup> This term has a theological ring, but as applied to Ethical Man it has no theological content. It indicates that in choosing the self one takes on a particular task; that of continually bringing the chosen self into being. This task is not reserved for the exceptional or unusual man but may be chosen by any man.<sup>3</sup>

It seems clear that for Kierkegaard to be a man is to have the possibility of choosing oneself in one's eternal validity. It would hardly be too much to say that one who has not so chosen is not yet fully a man, but only a bundle of accidents. The task implied in choosing

<sup>1</sup> S. A. Kierkegaard, Repetition, trans. W. Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, Torch Book Edition, 1964), p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 231, also Postscript, p. 311.



oneself is, then, the common task of humanity. Men differ as to particulars but in the face of possibility they all have the same task in common. Carrying out this task is a bond between men. Each man, then, in choosing the Ethical is choosing to carry out the "universal-human" in his everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

The important point in this is that the universal does not lie outside the self. The universal has its being through the realization of it by individual men. Kierkegaard says that to see life ethically is to see the universal, and to live ethically is to express the universal in one's life. Every man, in so far as he is a man, is the universal man.<sup>2</sup> It is by becoming oneself that one realizes the universal.

Ethical Man must, in order to be faithful to his choice of himself, constantly repeat that choice. Since this activity is also the realization of the universal, repetition is central to the common task of humanity.

It is to be expected that this inward repetition will have an appropriate outward expression. This is, in fact, the case. The possibilities are innumerable and Kierkegaard limits himself to three main areas: marriage, vocation, and friendship. Marriage receives the most attention. There is nothing uncommon about any of the three. They are of interest not because of any inalienable quality that attaches to them, but rather because they are appropriate subjects for the outward expression of the inward repeated choice of the self. None of these forms of expression, in so far as they are outward, are limited to Ethical individuals. Clearly other than Ethical individuals go through

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 260.



the marriage ceremony, for example. Relationships may be entered into otherwise than Ethically, but for Kierkegaard the status of such relationships is suspect.

~~Love~~ Marriage is characterized by love<sup>1</sup> but marriage, unlike love "contains an ethical and religious factor".<sup>2</sup> Marriage is based upon resignation.<sup>3</sup> Resignation in this context does not indicate a negative attitude, but rather the acceptance of repetition of choice. It is, in effect, the surrender of certain possibilities in order that others might be realized.<sup>4</sup>

Kierkegaard says of marriage that it is "sensuous but at the same time spiritual, free and at the same time necessary, absolute in itself and at the same time inwardly pointing beyond itself".<sup>5</sup> Sensuality is open to Aesthetic Man but spirituality is not, since by spirituality Kierkegaard means an ongoing and expanding thing. Aesthetic Man lacks sufficient stability for the spiritual. The combination of freedom and necessity may be understood in the terms set out earlier. The freedom involved is not the abstract freedom of arbitrary choice but the concrete freedom which is related to the good and is concerned with freely bringing something into being. Marriage as a condition expressing the ethical belongs then to the area of genuine positive freedom from which evil is excluded.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis here appears to differ from that in much of Kierkegaard's writing. For present purposes the Ethical Man is concentrated on rather than choice itself.

<sup>5</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 63.



Marriage is a free choice of a continuing relationship. In the second part of Either/Or the Judge is represented as saying that he would not wish to be loved by any woman other than his wife. If such a thing should occur he would do all he could to discourage it.<sup>1</sup> The nature of the relationship that he entered into in marrying excludes the possibility of any other similar relationship. Marriage cannot be the subject of experiment if it is to be understood ethically. In choosing to marry the Ethical Man commits himself to an extended relationship which must be maintained through the constant repetition of the choice. In choosing to marry he is choosing as a self and his choice is a part of his bringing that self into being. Ethical Man commits himself responsibly not to a single act, but rather to an indefinite number of acts extending over an indefinite period of time when he marries. He cannot marry on an "as if" basis.

The Ethical Man, in marrying, does not directly commit himself to anything external to himself; as for example to a specific code of action. Marriages differ but in their ethical character they are alike. Whatever the character of a particular marriage it is like all other ethical marriages if it involves a continuing responsibility on the part of the self. This is why Kierkegaard can say that marriage is harmed by cowardly husbands rather than seducers.<sup>2</sup>

In choosing to marry the Ethical Man is limited as to the way he puts his choice into operation. Marriage does not admit of deception. The Judge, in the opening section of the second volume of Either/Or,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 286.



describes a marriage based on deceit. The husband loves his wife but he surrounds her with illusions about the nature of their marriage. He engineers things to please her without her knowing it.<sup>1</sup> The chief difficulty in this lies not in the possibility of the wife discovering the deception, although that is a danger, nor in the lack of honesty implied in practising the deception, although it is clear that the Judge considers this attitude wrong. It lies in the Aesthetic character of the husband's attitude towards the marriage. He was too proud to give up the idea that his wife owed all her happiness to him.<sup>2</sup> This means, of course, that the responsibility recognized by the husband was not ethical responsibility. His marriage was primarily an external source of pleasure to him rather than internal and a part of him. Candor and understanding are thus central to marriage and in choosing marriage the Ethical Man must choose them too.

It follows that an annulled marriage is not a marriage, and the partners to an annulled marriage can never understand the nature of marriage through contemplating their discontinued relationship. Marriage is a continuing thing and cannot be understood other than in its continuity. It should also be observed that examination of marriage in terms of choice tends to make it appear fragmented; this is, however, a trick of perspective and not what Kierkegaard intends at all. Marriage, as Kierkegaard understands it and as it must be for his Ethical Man, is a continuous flowing thing.

The Ethical Man, in living ethically, expresses the universal.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 116 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 117.



It is expressed as much in his marriage as in the other aspects of his life. In entering into a marriage ethically he becomes more concrete, and moves further away from the superficiality of the Aesthetic.<sup>1</sup> It is because of this that Kierkegaard may say that it is a man's duty to marry. In expressing the universal-human a man becomes more concrete, and marriage is one of the main ways in which this can be done.<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard further notes that the wedding ceremony itself insists on the universal-human character of marriage.<sup>3</sup>

Duty may be understood with regard to marriage in several ways. Duty as the universal is required of everyone, but it is required of everyone as particular.<sup>4</sup> In a general way then marriage as a manner of realizing the universal is itself a duty. Duty is not, however, something imposed by an external force. A duty is something incumbent rather than imposed. Duty provides the individual with a check on his orientation.<sup>5</sup> It may also be seen as assisting love in the preservation of marriage. Love needs the support of duty in the face of difficulties. It becomes a source of confidence which love needs.<sup>6</sup>

Marriage is also a sustaining force for the Ethical Man. He is faced with constantly renewing his choice of himself but he cannot remain forever on "the pinnacle of the instant of choice".<sup>7</sup> Marriage aids him by maintaining a fresh current in his life. It keeps him moving forward.<sup>8</sup> Romantic love demands that a man put his present

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 167

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 68.



difficulties and concerns aside, or at least conceal them, while in the company of his mistress. There is no support or assistance in such a relationship, for it merely underlines the difficulty. Conjugal love, on the other hand, allows him to share his concerns. The commitment made in marriage keeps moving the Ethical Man forward despite discouragement.<sup>1</sup> It is because of this that Kierkegaard is so optimistic about turning a man's welfare over to his wife, provided he can be brought to marry ethically.<sup>2</sup> Marriage is not just another difficult task or demand made on the Ethical Man but a positive aid in the ongoing task of becoming a concrete self.

The term "spiritual" is applied to marriage by the Judge.<sup>3</sup> This should not be understood as a religious term. None of the apparently religious terms used by the Judge are of fully religious character for Kierkegaard who speaks of an "emasculation" of Either/Or which was intended to keep the book within ethical categories.<sup>4</sup> The term "spiritual" as applied to marriage here refers to its absolute universal character.

Vocation shares many of the characteristics of marriage. It is not merely a necessary evil but an essential part of the Ethical Man's life.<sup>5</sup> The Ethical does not tell a man what calling he must follow, but it does tell him that every man has a calling and that he can choose to follow his calling ethically.<sup>6</sup> As a general thing a man must work in order to live but work provides a possibility for the expression of his

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 314, 315.

<sup>4</sup> Postscript, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>5</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, pp. 295, 296.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 296.



personality<sup>1</sup>, his choice of himself. This may be seen as another case of free choice combined with necessity to produce an occasion for the outward expression of the inward choice.

Since every man can have a calling, and since every man can accomplish his job,<sup>2</sup> every man is involved in the universal-human.<sup>3</sup> Vocation, like marriage, is part of the common task of humanity. Also, as in marriage, vocation can help to move a man forward through periods of boredom, dullness and irresolution. He is aware of the need to be faithful to his calling.<sup>4</sup>

A vocation usually involves a norm or norms external to the individual but rather than making him dependent on the external these norms are a point of reference for the free activity of the individual.<sup>5</sup> As with marriage, duty is internalized.<sup>6</sup>

Friendship can also be entered into ethically, but it has a lesser degree of ethical validity than marriage does.<sup>7</sup> The Aesthete is cut off from friendship because his fortuitous nature does not provide a sufficient basis for a continuing relationship. The most he can manage is to recognize a kindred spirit but even in that case the conditions for openness and trust are absent. Kierkegaard says that the absolute condition for friendship is agreement in life view.<sup>8</sup> Such agreement is not a random thing and cannot be founded on vague feelings or sympathies.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 296, 297.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>9</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Loc. cit.



True friendship is always conscious of its motives, and is always a positive thing.<sup>1</sup> Friendship shares many of the characteristics of marriage and vocation when considered ethically, but is limited by the factors of personal proximity and a relatively greater fragility. There is, however, the possibility for true friendship to transcend these limitations.<sup>2</sup> In friendship one may participate in a possibility open to all men, and therefore, it is also an area in which the universal may be realized.

The keys to realizing the universal are choice and repetition. Man is finite and his choices are finite, but in choosing one may look forward to future action. The finite can be said to be overcome in so far as the choice of the self leads to continuity in finitude. The possibilities presented in choice and repetition are open to all men and ethical activity may be seen as a common bond between selves.

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<sup>1</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 326.



## CHAPTER II

### THE ETHICAL STAGE AND THE RELIGIOUS STAGE

#### (A) Ethical Despair

One cannot begin to understand the Ethical Stage without first considering the Aesthetic Stage; but one can hardly be said to have finally understood it without some consideration of the Religious Stage. The Religious Stage is, in fact, two stages but it will be enough for purposes of this thesis to treat the Religious Stage in general terms since it is the Religious Stage as the upper boundary or limit of the Ethical Stage that is of interest and not the Religious Stage in itself.

Once again it is as well to point out that taking the stages as a descriptive whole, were the religious stage missing human experience could not be adequately accounted for. Kierkegaard indicates two of the ways in which this is so in the Postscript. Firstly, as has been outlined, it is by means of despair that the ethical self is found. In this there is, however, a contradiction. One may and must despair completely, but when this is done the person in the state of despair lacks the resources to come back out of despair.<sup>1</sup> When the ground has been entirely cut from under one's feet there appears to be no way to begin again. For Kierkegaard the individual must, at this point have divine assistance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Postscript, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 230, 231.



Secondly, truth as something internal and edifying has only entered the consciousness of the ethical man through his anxiety in the face of the inadequacies of the aesthetic. In becoming ethical he has put these fears behind him, and thereby, has lost his grasp of truth as inwardness. The Ethical which previously allowed him to discover truth is now the occasion for a failure of the understanding. A new fear is needed in order that edification may take place. At this point Kierkegaard speaks of the ethical as a temptation. The only way for the recovery of edification is the movement to a new and higher stage.<sup>1</sup>

These points will be raised again in an attempt to determine their force. Their importance for the moment is that they point, for Kierkegaard, to the need for a further descriptive level. Once again he hoped to carry the reader along with him, and it becomes necessary to follow his description into the religious level. The first step in this direction is ethical despair.

One of the first manifestations of the problem grows directly out of a situation already described in the previous chapter. A man's solidarity with the rest of humanity in the common task is central to the whole treatment of the ethical stage. Perfection at the ethical level is seen both as a state and a task. "Perfection in oneself means . . . therefore the perfect participation in the whole."<sup>2</sup> The demand is extreme. Each individual may score successes but the task as a whole is a colossal one. It has no apparent end short of death and is unmitigated by shortcuts or simple aids. In dealing with the possibilities of

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<sup>1</sup> Postscript, p. 231.

<sup>2</sup> The Concept of Dread, p. 26.



the ethical stage a magnificent vista of interlocking relationships and activities is unfolded. This view is appealing both descriptively and emotionally but it has not yet taken into account the difficulty of attaining and maintaining it. Since the leap from the aesthetic to the ethical is an ongoing thing Kierkegaard is clearly not ruling out the possibility of backsliding into aesthetic attitudes. Given a level or condition where this is a constant danger and successes are never fully consolidated it would not be surprising to find the Ethical Man asking if there is not something more.

The difficulties appear to arise in two different ways: the first relates to one's relations with others and may be crudely labelled the external, the second relates to the inner demands of the ethical responsibility and may be crudely labelled the internal. First, then, an examination of the external difficulties is in order.

Once again it is to be observed that Kierkegaard was not concerned with producing a total description of a system but rather with gaining certain specific points by means of the project presented in the pseudonymous works. He was not concerned to state what followed easily from the materials he had presented. It is not, therefore, easy to document the nature of the external difficulties. The temptation at this point is to go to the Journals for such documentation; but this use of them tends to obscure the issues as it raises the question as to how far the pseudonymous works are pseudonymous in spirit as well as in name. Such considerations soon involve one in a consideration of the real status of the religious works (whatever that may mean) and the project is no longer being treated as a unit. It is, then, probably safest to confine present considerations to a few safe basic points.



It is clear that when an individual stands in a complex set of relationships he is faced not only with opportunity but also with limitation. There is no guarantee that all demands which the individual recognizes can be consistently met. In a specific case, for example, while on the optimistic side the participation in family affairs is a key to participation in the whole, on the negative side there remains the fact that recognized public duties can and do conflict with those within the close limits of the family. The ethical man must and does choose between them. How he does this is not important for the moment. The significant thing is that two valid but conflicting demands are made and that only one can be met. In this situation one would not blame the ethical man for failure to do both--but lack of blame will not resolve his problem which arises from the fact that both demands are valid. Nothing can negate their ethical validity. It has already been observed that the demand of the ethical is for perfection.

It could also be observed that the ethical man cannot appeal to human finitude to get him out of his predicament. The categories he works within do not supply him with a point of reference over against which the postulated finitude would have any content. The Ethical Stage in demanding perfection implies perfectability but the rigors of life interfere.

This sort of objection resembles current arguments against the position taken by many naturalistic humanists who attempt to assert with Corliss Lamont that "This life is all and enough" and that the affirmation of life and confidence in man's scientific ability provide the basis for a reasoned optimistic approach to ethical problems.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Corliss Lamont, The Philosophy of Humanism (New York: The Wisdom Library, Paperbound ed., 1957), Chapters III & VI.



Kierkegaard was not, however undertaking an exercise in Christian apologetics. He was more interested in his whole project than in refuting points raised by thinkers in the humanist tradition. Instead of attacking the followers of Lessing (whose deistic humanism still attracts some adherents) in the Postscript he pays Lessing a sincere and glowing tribute, granting while he does it that some of the theses he puts forward are only possibly attributable to Lessing.<sup>1</sup> It is hardly possible to doubt that Kierkegaard's enthusiasm for Lessing's work is sincere, but he carefully confines his commentary to that aspect of Lessing's thought most favorable to the line of thought he is presenting, concentrating particularly on Lessing's respect for the religious category, the ongoing nature of man's task, and the importance of the subjective aspect of human activity.

Kierkegaard's Ethical Man, in the course of his everyday life, must face a number of universal demands, all valid and in some cases conflicting. He is not equipped to meet all these demands and their presence gives rise to a despair producing situation. Given the Ethical Man's subjective approach he cannot take refuge in externalization and await more knowledge and more control. The difficulty attacks the roots of his whole approach to the world. The answers to it cannot wait and optimism without content will not satisfy him. The quest as proposed by Kierkegaard is for an eternal happiness, and such a happiness cannot stem from historical or scientific achievement.<sup>2</sup>

The internal difficulties experienced by the Ethical Man are not entirely separable from the external ones. They may be understood as a

<sup>1</sup> Postscript, Book One, Chapter Two.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-97.



part of the individual's response to the practical difficulties he experiences. The internal difficulties arise as problems of judgment, not as to the course that one is to follow, but rather as to the condition in which one finds oneself. The absolute difference between good and evil emerges with the choice of the concrete self.<sup>1</sup> The Ethical Man works in terms of right and wrong, not only with reference to choosing between alternatives but also with reference to the conditions which he recognizes as goals and the conditions he actually attains. The failure to meet all the universal demands of everyday life leads the Ethical Man to make judgments not only about everyday life but also about himself. The task of becoming himself, which is also the common task<sup>2</sup> is too much for him. He must, in time, come to recognize that, given the ethical as a starting point the failure is his and not the world's. It is not that he lives in an imperfect world but that the imperfections are his own and he is responsible for them. The responsibility which makes the ethical life possible is also the responsibility which makes the ethical life unbearable.

This difficulty was not intended by Kierkegaard to be understood as a theoretical one. The task faced by the Ethical Man is presented to him as an existing individual.<sup>3</sup> As Kierkegaard points out, the Ethical Man, even while involved in ethical deliberation is ethically responsible for the use of his time.<sup>4</sup> The urgent and unrelenting demands

<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 227.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 309.

<sup>3</sup> Postscript, p. 469.

<sup>4</sup> Loc. cit.



of the ethical do not allow the Ethical Man to step back to survey the ground--he is a part of it. Since this is the case it is beyond comprehension that he could accept defeat. Such an acceptance would amount to the denial of himself and in his unwillingness to deny himself he strives more desperately than ever to fulfil the ethical demands. His difficulty did not, however, stem from lack of effort. The more energetically he pursues the ethical goals the stronger his awareness becomes of his actual position in relation to the universals he has recognized. His dissatisfaction with himself increases accordingly--but dissatisfaction with the self as chosen indicates a deterioration in the position of the Ethical Man. His viewpoint has shifted in a way that he cannot deal with.

The Ethical Man is a self-conscious man but the state of his self-consciousness as a result of increasing dissatisfaction changes, from his point of view for the worse. He is constantly stumbling over inner contradictions. The condition which he finally recognizes himself to be in may be termed guilt, but this should not be confused with Kierkegaard's later use of the term "guilt" which is guilt discovered over against absolute ends. The Ethical Man as ethical man has not yet become aware of these ends.<sup>1</sup>

It is tempting to call this form of guilt "psychological guilt" since it resembles the sort of condition indicated as "guilt feelings" in popular psychology. The categories of popular psychology are not, however, adequate for treatment of what Kierkegaard intends. They presuppose certain norms which Kierkegaard would certainly reject, and

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Postscript, pp. 468ff.



they lead to a fragmented view of man which Kierkegaard would find equally repugnant. If the condition can be imagined independent of these attitudes one can gain an idea of it.

There is a sense in which the guilt of the Ethical Man can be understood as guilt before the law. Kierkegaard says the ethical is both the universal and the abstract. As abstraction it is prohibitive and so appears as law.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that while the ethical may take the form of law it cannot be entirely reduced to law, but in as far as it has a prohibitive aspect it may be offended against. The Ethical Man then is in the wrong against the ethical as abstract, and is inadequate before it as universal. He is caught between his own nature and appetites on one hand and the universal demands on the other. Whichever he attempts to satisfy it seems that he is doomed to failure and guilt.

The despair of the Ethical Man is quite different from the despair of the Aesthete. The Ethical Man is not bored. He cannot be blasé about ethical activity. He has behind him the experience of being a concrete self. Even if this is threatened the memory of it sets a standard which he must, at least, seek to recreate. Although he judges himself to be in the wrong his critical awareness of right and wrong remain. Unlike the standards drawn from current taste that the Aesthete drew upon the standards of the Ethical Stage have a seriousness and a stability that the despairing Ethical Man cannot overlook. It is quite true that the Ethical is no longer enough for him but, having understood it, he is in a better position to evaluate the possibilities offered by

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<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 259.



another analysis. Also, having successfully come through a previous condition of despair he is less likely to bog down in it without searching for a new departure point. When the first bitter pangs of disappointment have passed, the Ethical Man may even find himself able to take up the search hopefully while continuing to function as best he can on the surviving elements of his ethical viewpoint. Kierkegaard would not have found such an "as if" basis for action acceptable as it does not accord with the self as chosen. Kierkegaard's point here is that there is a self, whatever is done with it, and it is an error to act as if attitudes had no significant support. It would seem then that there must be a sort of spectator condition intermediate between the Ethical and the Religious just as there was between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in which awareness continues and life goes on at the "immediate" level. This intermediate stage is Humor.

As with the despairing Aesthete practising Irony, the despairing Ethicist does not have the field of Humor to himself, for, as will be seen, it also serves as an incognito for the Religious Man who expresses himself indirectly.<sup>1</sup> Care must be taken not to confuse the two.

Humor is a stage of inaction as in it all is resolved into contradiction.<sup>2</sup> In it nothing is assimilated in a decisive manner.<sup>3</sup> One case of this is to be seen in the Humorist's response to the question as to whether there can be an historical point of departure for eternal happiness. He simply considers any lifespan too short to be significant for

<sup>1</sup> Postscript, p. 447.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 402.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 242.



eternity, gives up the search and returns to the contemplation of past matters.<sup>1</sup> For him temporal life has little if any significance as opposed to the eternal.<sup>2</sup> He continues to act but he sees things in retrospect.

Kierkegaard argued that, appearances to the contrary, humor is not essentially different from irony. Both involve ". . . the retirement out of the temporal into the eternal by way of recollection, . . ."<sup>3</sup> Humor seems to give existence more significance than Irony does, but neither provides a basis for decisive action so the apparent difference between them is of little significance.<sup>4</sup> It is not difficult to agree with this observation, always provided it is admitted that in an important sense the Humorist has gone farther than the Ironist even though they occupy similar positions for the moment.

Kierkegaard noted an immature type of humor that should be distinguished from the true humor that he recognized as intermediate between the Ethical and the Religious. This immature type is exemplified by the expeditions of the Aesthete into the realm of absurdity.<sup>5</sup> It is humor in the form of wit exercised for the amusement of one who has become bored. Since the Ethical Man is never bored he is too mature to fall into this sort of activity. Frivolity is not a fault of Kierkegaard's Humorist.

Just as the experience of boredom is essential to the position of Ironist, the awareness of suffering is essential to the position of

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 242-243.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.



Humorist. The Humorist knows that suffering is important for existence but he does not understand the significance of suffering by itself.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that the Humorist should be trying to treat suffering as something abstract, but rather that the Humorist knows only the fact of suffering and not its full implications (which, for Kierkegaard, lead into the Religious). Not knowing what to do about suffering the Humorist's weapon against it is the joke--but it is characteristically a black joke. As Kierkegaard observes, one wants to both laugh and weep with the Humorist.<sup>2</sup> Just as the Ironist's techniques settled nothing, the joke settles nothing. The Humorist still leaves the important difficulty unsolved. His humor is defensive but it is a weak defence because suffering cannot be laughed away. Suffering is not a matter of misfortune but is bound up with existence, and the Humorist knows this.<sup>3</sup> A major difference then between Humor and Irony is that Humor takes account of suffering while Irony is only able to take account of the manner of expression of suffering.<sup>4</sup>

Kierkegaard frequently insists that humor is the boundary of religiosity.<sup>5</sup> The humorist may be simply humorist or the religious man incognito.<sup>6</sup> The difference between the humorist and the religious man incognito is one of categories. The Religious Man has made another leap,<sup>7</sup> the Humorist has not yet done so.

This leaves a problem with respect to the pseudonymous works.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 400.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Ibid., pp. 159-60.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 401.

<sup>7</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Loc. cit.



The Religious Stage seems most importantly represented in the Postscript and in Fear and Trembling, however Johannes Climacus, the putative author of the former describes himself as essentially a humorist attempting to explore Christian Religiosity,<sup>1</sup> and Johannes De Silentio in the latter admits that he lacks the courage to follow Abraham.<sup>2</sup> The Fragments cannot fill the gap for it too is represented as the work of Climacus. The task of unraveling the levels of deception is difficult. For present purposes it may be enough to treat the representation of the Religious Stage in these works as seriously intended but tentative without trying to decide what sort of humorists the putative authors are.

The Ethical ends in failure, guilt and suffering, but it is unable to deal with any of these. Guilt, for example, demands atonement which belongs to the Religious Stage. The Ethical can only offer a sort of formal restitution. This problem of restitution also leads into the Religious because full restitution demands new categories. Limited restitution leads one back around the circle of failure and suffering again.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 404.

<sup>2</sup> Fear and Trembling, p.124.



## (B) Ethical and Religious Categories

The problems arising out of the Ethical Stage and requiring treatment in the Religious Stage are failure, suffering and guilt. Kierkegaard did not approach them in the same way he approached the problems growing out of the Aesthetic. It would seem that a major reason for this is that the movement of the individual into the Religious and the movement of the Aesthete in choosing himself differ in an extremely important way. In the movement to the Religious, unlike the movement to the Ethical, the limitations of temporality are broken through. In each case there is a change in posture, but in the Ethical the posture relates to the universal human while in the Religious it relates to the Eternal. Kierkegaard's tactics changed accordingly.

The first work to deal with the Religious Stage as such was Fear and Trembling. It cut through the considerations of general religiousness and focused on the faith of Abraham. In going directly to a central aspect of Religiousness Kierkegaard is able to convey two things: firstly that there are human experiences that the Ethical cannot comprehend, and secondly that the Religious Man differs from the Ethical Man as to mood. In it Kierkegaard also provided an example of what he meant when he said, as in the Postscript<sup>1</sup>, that the Ethical becomes a temptation.

The demand made of Abraham that he sacrifice Isaac is clearly contrary to the Ethical task of realizing the universal. Abraham was going to murder his son. Considering this from the Ethical viewpoint which, because it is concerned with imminent significance, concentrates

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<sup>1</sup> Postscript, p. 231.



on Abraham's act and not on Abraham's relationship to God; the act is properly termed "murder". Like the orator who condemned the man who sought to follow Abraham,<sup>1</sup> the Ethical Man has no means of making a distinction between sacrifice and murder. To the Ethical Man it might appear that, on the balance, Abraham wanted to murder Isaac. For the Religious Man it seems that, on the contrary, Abraham wanted to do God's will. For the Ethical Man, the death of Isaac is a loss of possibility for Abraham--an essentially self destructive act. For Abraham the death of Isaac would have been a loss of possibility, but it would also have been much more. God, having made Abraham's great wish come true, was destroying the hopes built upon it.<sup>2</sup> The demand for Isaac's sacrifice was an attack on Abraham's moral position, but that is not the significant point. The important attack was on Abraham's faith. The ordinary demands are superseded by those made in the context of the higher relationship. For Abraham then, the loss of possibility involved is not an essentially self destructive act. Kierkegaard takes pains to point out that had Abraham not been prepared to sacrifice Isaac he might have been many things but he would not have been Father Abraham.<sup>3</sup>

Kierkegaard explores briefly one of these possibilities--heroic self-sacrifice, a position much more understandable for the Ethical Man. Abraham could have sacrificed himself in the place of Isaac, apologizing for the inferiority of the victim. Kierkegaard calls this a great and

<sup>1</sup> Fear and Trembling, pp. 40-41.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 37.



glorious act but points out that it is an act founded on doubt rather than faith.<sup>1</sup> He points out that Abraham would have been remembered and admired for this act, but it still would have been a lesser thing than what Abraham actually did. The pseudonymous author says that he can think himself into the hero but he cannot think himself into Abraham.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Abraham is treated simply, albeit speculatively, as an actual story involving actual individuals. No questions are raised as to whether there was a God who made the demand, or whether God could make such a demand, or how Abraham knew the demand had been made. The religious is a part of human experience just as certain types of popular taste are a part of human experience. Religiousness is there, the problem is one of communication. Direct communication, always difficult, becomes almost impossibly so with the religious. Johannes De Silentio presents the story of Abraham apparently as a humorist unable to understand Abraham, but he makes us aware that there is something which cannot be understood in the familiar ethical way.<sup>3</sup> He achieves, not explanation, but confrontation. In the confrontation the vast difference between the Ethical and the Religious Man becomes apparent and the need for a leap in moving from the ethical mood to the religious mood is made clear. Kierkegaard sums it up: "The ethical constitutes the temptation; the God-relationship has come into being; the imminence of ethical despair has been broken through; the leap is posited; the absurd constitutes the notification."<sup>4</sup> The absurdity involved here is not general but the specific result of the conflict

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> Fear and Trembling, p.124, also Postscript, p.234.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Postscript, p. 234 (Italics Kierkegaard's).



arising between reflective consciousness and the religious paradigm.<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard raises three problems based on the case of Abraham: "Can there be a teleological suspension of the ethical?", "Is there such a thing as an absolute duty toward God?", and "Was Abraham ethically correct in keeping silent about his purpose?". These three questions all serve to illustrate the basic differences between the Ethical and the Religious.

The first problem returns to a point already noted. The Ethical has its telos within it. Its demands are universal.<sup>2</sup> When the individual asserts himself as particular he offends against the Ethical. Can the individual then, act as particular in circumstances which make the action not a negation of the Ethical, but which suspend its applicability while keeping it intact?<sup>3</sup> To put the question another way; are there ends higher than Ethical ends which may be served without negating the worth of the Ethical within its own sphere? Is it possible that the Ethical holds, and also that Abraham was right? For this to be so faith must go beyond the Ethical.<sup>4</sup>

It may be observed that, given Kierkegaard's account of the Ethical, there is no reason to suppose it is impossible to go beyond the Ethical provided a new basis for the understanding of the self is introduced. The difficulty in this is that the Ethical cannot supply the basis. Once again a leap must be made. In the Ethical the particular

<sup>1</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>2</sup> Fear and Trembling, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Loc. cit.



is the particular by virtue of the universal. Kierkegaard says: ". . . faith is this paradox, that the particular is higher than the universal."<sup>1</sup> At this point it becomes necessary to distinguish between two sorts of question. On one hand there is the Ethical Man's question, "How is it possible for the particular to be higher than the universal?" On the basis of his position it is impossible. He can only describe the suggestion as absurd. On the other hand one may suppose that there is, or may be, some higher relationship which is established at the Religious level. The question here is, "How is it possible that such a relationship may be established?" Kierkegaard treats this point in the Fragments. This last question can, of course, only be asked by someone prepared to violate the limits of the Ethical. Such a violation is not difficult to accomplish in a tentative or theoretically speculative way. It is, however, very difficult to accomplish at the more serious level of existence. The Ethical Man must risk his very being to ask it. Presumably only an Ethical Man very far gone in despair would ever dare do so. The leap is not made easily.

Johannes De Silentio cannot explain, demonstrate, or prove anything about the story of Abraham, except that it lies beyond the ethical understanding. He does not see it as a "disorderly" phenomenon: "Faith is a miracle, and yet no man is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is unified is passion, and faith is a passion."<sup>2</sup>

The second problem is that of duty towards God. On the broad view it is possible to say that all duties, in as much as they relate to

<sup>1</sup> Fear and Trembling, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 77.



the universal, also relate to God. This is not satisfactory as in the performance of a particular duty one may not come into relation with God.<sup>1</sup> One is not permitted to forget the unique character of actions carried out in direct relation to God. If all duties relate to God, as may be argued, God becomes the abstract divine.<sup>2</sup> Following this line of thought, the abstraction is drawn into the principle itself. Instead of duty relating to God, duty becomes God. God is absorbed into the Ethical. This is clearly unacceptable to Kierkegaard and to all Christians. The Living God can never be a principle. The reduction of God to the level of a principle makes God manageable, but those who draw on actual religious experience claim that such a reduction falsifies the relationship. To borrow the language of Buber, a God who is a principle is part of an "I-It" relationship and not an "I-Thou" relationship. As Kierkegaard observes, it is impossible to love such a God.<sup>3</sup>

There is nothing unusual about the Ethical Man speaking of God, going to church, or admiring a sermon. Judge William is represented as doing all these things. The position of Judge William is not, however, the position of Abraham. The question arising out of the Abraham story appears to be: "Can Abraham justify his actions by claiming to have observed a higher duty?" At the outset this would seem to be impossible since duty relates to realizing universals, as so far understood, and Abraham went beyond the universal to stand as particular. The Ethical

<sup>1</sup> Fear and Trembling, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.



expression is concentrated in outward manifestations of the inner ethical choice. It is an error, from the Ethical point of view, to turn one's attention to the inward factors for this diverts one's attention from the task of realizing the universal.<sup>1</sup> Abraham's assertion of the particular is not such a reversion to the inward aspects of the Ethical. The inwardness which concerns Abraham is a new inwardness; a higher inwardness arrived at by virtue of faith.<sup>2</sup> Since faith comes by virtue of the absurd,<sup>3</sup> this higher inwardness will be beyond the understanding of the Ethical Man who will tend to interpret it as a rationalization for a reversion to the type of inwardness that he is familiar with. The higher inwardness is not, therefore, understandable from the Ethical viewpoint. It becomes necessary to try to understand it from the other viewpoint--the Religious.

Given faith as a starting point the universals of the Ethical stage appear in quite a different light. One's relation to the absolute is no longer determined by one's relation to the universal, but one's relation to the universal is determined by one's relation to the absolute.<sup>4</sup> The Ethical task remains but it becomes quite a different thing. Just as the Aesthetic is "given back" in the Ethical,<sup>5</sup> the Ethical is given back in the Religious. Saying that there is an absolute duty toward God is, for Kierkegaard, another way of expressing the paradox.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fear and Trembling, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit., also p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> As, for example, in the "Aesthetic Validity of Marriage", Either/Or, Vol. II.

<sup>6</sup> Fear and Trembling, p. 80.



The duty spoken of here is not the same as the duty spoken of in the Ethical, applying as it does to the absolute relation of the individual to the absolute.<sup>1</sup> Something higher than the accomplishment of the Ethical task is required of the Religious Man. This has the effect of reducing the universals of the Ethical to a position of relativity, but it does not abolish them.<sup>2</sup> As an example, Kierkegaard points out that the love of God that a man of faith has may cause him to love his neighbour.<sup>3</sup> Thus the absolute relationship leads back into the kind of relationship comprehended by the Ethical.

The man who has faith, Kierkegaard's knight of faith, knows the value of the universal and is far from dismissing it as an illusion, but he also knows the higher relationship and values it still higher.<sup>4</sup> Abraham accomplished nothing for the universal and yet he is honored above the tragic hero.<sup>5</sup> The situation of the knight of faith is most difficult of all because he stands in a special relationship stripped of all external aids. He has only himself with which to meet the demands of the relationship.<sup>6</sup>

The technique Kierkegaard used in this section of Fear and Trembling in the service of indirect communication is clearly that of closing off all alternatives of understanding except the religious, thereby forcing the reader either to attempt to understand the story of Abraham religiously, or to give up the attempt altogether. It is difficult to say whether this is the most effective way of bringing the religious to

<sup>1</sup> Fear and Trembling, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-87.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 89.



the attention of one who is not within its categories, but Kierkegaard did not claim there was any guarantee of success. This first confrontation is supplemented at length by the Fragments, The Concept of Dread, a major part of the Postscript, and finally Sickness Unto Death which forms a sort of bridge between the pseudonymous and religious works. The present topic does not demand a full examination of all this material since the Religious is examined only in the interest of discovering the upper limits of Kierkegaard's Ethical Stage.

The third problem treated in Fear and Trembling is: "Was Abraham ethically correct in keeping silent about his purpose?" At the outset it would seem that the ethical demands of the marriage relationship required him to tell Sarah, and that similar, though perhaps less strong, considerations would require him to tell the others involved. Silence is, however, described as "the mutual understanding between the Deity and the individual."<sup>1</sup> How is it possible to explain such an understanding to one not actually involved in it? Abraham knew of it and so did God--but how could Sarah? The case of Mary taken up earlier in the work parallels this.<sup>2</sup> The angel took no precautions to protect Mary's reputation,<sup>3</sup> with the possible exception of a revelation to Joseph (Matthew I, 19-24). One doubts whether the presently generally accepted explanation of what happened to Mary would have impressed her family or friends. Mary knew the truth of the matter and accepted it (Luke I, 38), but she could hardly have explained it. Ethically speaking Mary should have

<sup>1</sup> Fear and Trembling, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 75.



told Joseph about this, but had she done so he would have undoubtedly concluded that she was insane as well as pregnant and therefore poor wife-material on two counts. If the relationship of faith is as Kierkegaard described it, Matthew is undoubtedly correct--a special communication was the only way Joseph could have been brought to understand.

The conclusion that Kierkegaard drew from this is that despite the ethical demands of family relationship Abraham did not speak because he was unable to make himself intelligible.<sup>1</sup> The answer to the question so often raised by Johannes De Silentio: "Who can understand Abraham?" can only strictly be answered "Nobody". It is, however, clear that this answer can only be given by someone with an understanding of the Religious Stage. Everyone else is free to misunderstand Abraham according to their various interests and abilities. In the end there is no use in trying to decide whether Abraham acted ethically in any of this since all the key matters transcend the ethical. There even seems to be something curious about the term "teleological suspension of the ethical" since the question only really arises from the viewpoint of the Ethical Man who cannot be expected to understand it anyway. The man in the Religious Stage does not need the grounds for such suspension explained to him--he is directly aware of it when it takes place.

The question of the availability of knowledge of the divine brings one back to one of the questions raised at the beginning of the previous section--How is it possible to make a beginning when everything has been doubted?<sup>2</sup> A full treatment of this would presumably have

<sup>1</sup> Fear and Trembling, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> Postscript, pp. 230-31.



to begin with a detailed point by point analysis of the Fragments and go on from there. For present purposes perhaps it is enough to suggest some of the lines of thought which draw on the human-divine relationship, and thereby strongly distinguish the Religious from the Ethical.

Inquiry about the Religious by someone outside it involves the same sort of difficulty as the Socratic problem of seeking that which one does not know.<sup>1</sup> A doctrine of recollection can hardly be plausibly introduced here to fill the gap. In one thing at least Kierkegaard admits that Socrates was right. The highest relationship one human being can have to another is that of midwife.<sup>2</sup> In divine matters it seems that no man can safely claim to teach others--the inwardness of the Religious precludes it. The project proposed by Kierkegaard is an enquiry into the extent to which the truth admits of being learned. This brings one back to the second of the questions raised at the beginning of the previous section: What possible foundation is there for an edifying truth, given the loss of fear by the Ethical Man?<sup>3</sup>

Assuming that one is ignorant of truth at the outset, how can one acquire it? It would seem that a teacher is needed, but at the Religious level no man can stand as a teacher to another. Furthermore the teacher must not only present the learner with the truth but also make him able to understand it, for if he had had the condition for understanding the truth before he could have grasped it on his own initiative.<sup>4</sup> The assumption was, however, that the ignorance was genuine and

<sup>1</sup> Fragments, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Postscript, p.231.

<sup>4</sup> Fragments, p.17.



and complete. The learner has to be taught to ask the question, and the question implies the answer.<sup>1</sup> This situation requires God Himself as teacher.<sup>2</sup> Thus Kierkegaard preserves the religious categories. The learner discovers that he is in error through consciousness of his own guilt, which religiously understood is sin<sup>3</sup> (which is more fully dealt with in The Concept of Dread). In becoming open to truth the learner is set free from the limitations he had imposed on himself through misunderstanding his own freedom.<sup>4</sup> This being the case, God is now seen as Saviour and Redeemer.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, when the teacher gives the condition and knowledge of the truth he performs an act of atonement on behalf of the learner, freeing him from the weight of retribution which his guilt demanded.<sup>6</sup> This change in the learner Kierkegaard calls Conversion,<sup>7</sup> and the attitude of the learner toward his former actions he calls Repentance.<sup>8</sup>

This suggests the way in which the Religious Stage meets the problems remaining from the Ethical Stage: failure, suffering and guilt. The learner is enabled to do something about the guilt, and the suffering and failure are seen from a new viewpoint. The failure becomes understandable. What was lacking was a relationship to the absolute. The

<sup>1</sup> Fragments, pp. 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-21.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 21. The italicized words appear so in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> & <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 23. Italics once more as in text.



new level opens new possibilities. It is to be noted that guilt, suffering, and failure are not rendered unreal by the higher level. They are all genuine and must be dealt with. The higher level offers the possibility of dealing with them in a new way. One might even say the learner is in a position to genuinely deal with them for the first time.

Even given direct experience within Religious categories, things can still go wrong for the seeker after truth. The Religious encounter may be misunderstood by him. This misunderstanding by an individual considering himself as particular Kierkegaard calls "Offense".<sup>1</sup> This misunderstanding is a failure in the face of religious paradox. (It will be remembered that faith comes by virtue of this paradox.) Kierkegaard points out that offence is always an act and never an event.<sup>2</sup> It denies the paradox but every expression it gives to that denial reflects the paradox.<sup>3</sup> The reason rejects the paradox because it is absurd--but it is not equipped to make that discovery on its own.<sup>4</sup> From this it may be seen that it is not enough simply to become aware of the paradox for until it is embraced the relationship is misunderstood. Setting the matter in different terms; it should not be expected that a man can reason himself into an understanding of matters relating to the religious paradox (like faith), he must rather live the relationship that provides the basis for acceptance of the paradox.

It is evident from the material that has already been covered that understanding of the Religious can never be arrived at second hand.

<sup>1</sup> Fragments, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 65.



The requirement is an action based on one's particularity. It is an inward act. This being the case it is clear that no one can do this on behalf of another, nor can it be done at one moment in history for all men at all times. Kierkegaard enlarges on this in the chapter in the Fragments entitled "The Disciple at Second Hand".<sup>1</sup> This leads to one important conclusion if Kierkegaard's account is to have any specifically Christian content--Christ must be contemporary with every generation. The relationship can only be established when God Himself comes.<sup>2</sup> The role of God as saviour and redeemer has already been noted. Kierkegaard also establishes that He comes in the form of a servant,<sup>3</sup> for otherwise the relationship which results is a mere acknowledgment of power and not a grasping of the Truth. Given this explanation it may be seen that faith is a condition,<sup>4</sup> and that it is not a form of knowledge but a relationship.<sup>5</sup>

At this point one may well wonder whether Kierkegaard has not, in fact, proposed a double ethical standard, one level being for the Ethical Man and the other for the Religious. In a sense he has, but such an explanation would be too simple. The Religious Stage does not destroy the Ethical Stage but transforms it. The duties, possibilities and responsibilities of the Ethical Stage remain. The universals still hold; but they hold in a different way. To the Ethical Man the Ethical Stage presents absolute demands. To the Religious Man these demands are still

<sup>1</sup> Fragments, pp. 111-138.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 76.



presented but they are not seen as absolute. When the Religious Man performs an action which is usually understood as the outward expression of the Ethical he may well be expressing more than the ethical for he may have chosen to do it in consequence of the higher relationship. Since the Religious relationship is inward there need be nothing outward to distinguish the Religious Man from the Ethical Man. It is only when, as with Abraham, a case appears in which the Religious supersedes some element of the Ethical that an indication of the difference may come to light.

The last paragraph may also serve as a partial explanation of another apparent confusion in Kierkegaard's presentation. It appears, at the outset, that Ethics comes before Religion and is, in some sense, its foundation. Appreciation of the transformation the Ethical undergoes is one corrective for this apparent difficulty, but there is another. It will be remembered that in the Postscript<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard held that it was impossible to begin in the Ethical without the assistance of the Religious. If this point is insisted on the apparent scandal of the Religious having its foundation in secular ethics is removed. Insistence on this point, however, apparently leads to another contradiction. If the Aesthete cannot move to the Ethical level without the help of the Religious, and if the Religious is only reached by way of the Ethical then it seems that Kierkegaard's whole system breaks down into a mystification. The answer to this observation is simply that the ~~stæ~~ e were never intended to be a philosophical system and ought not to be judged by those standards. The whole pseudonymous literature is better interpreted as a massive undertaking in indirect communication.

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<sup>1</sup> Postscript, pp. 230-231.



As long as Kierkegaard was able to convey what he wished, the mechanics of his vehicle were not important. The situation becomes doubly interesting when someone wishing to reach other goals than Kierkegaard undertakes an interpretation of the pseudonymous literature.

It appears that two general conclusions have been demonstrated in the foregoing treatment of the Religious: Firstly, the Ethical Stage cannot furnish an adequate basis for the whole of human experience; and secondly, the postulation of the Religious as a higher inwardness is offensive to the Ethical Man.



## (C) Religiousness and Ethical Man

The Ethical Man as treated so far is adequately represented by Kierkegaard's Judge William. There is no reason to suppose that every Ethical Man would be as accommodating from Kierkegaard's point of view as the Judge is. It has been assumed in the foregoing that Judge William is fully the Ethical Man rather than a humorist or one involved in either segment of the Religious Stage. It is noteworthy, however, that the Judge talks freely about love of God and repentance,<sup>1</sup> the dependance of marriage on God,<sup>2</sup> and the significance of a well conceived sermon.<sup>3</sup> This receptivity makes the movement to the Religious Stage somewhat easier for Kierkegaard than it would otherwise have been. The independent value of the Ethical may be tested by imagining an Ethical Man unwilling to venture into the Religious area.

Adopting the position of an Ethical Man reluctant to accept the religious, one of the first points of dispute is Kierkegaard's claim that there can be no starting point for the Ethical without divine intervention.<sup>4</sup> Should such a man mistake the Stages for a philosophical system at the outset he would presumably end with the conclusion that it is circular, confused, and inadequate. Let it be supposed, then, that this man recognizes that this is a stratagem; a project of indirect communication. Let it also be supposed that he finds the

<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> Stages, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 342.

<sup>4</sup> Postscript, p. 230.



treatment of the Aesthetic and Ethical Stages descriptively convincing.

He wishes, therefore, to preserve these two stages but cannot agree with Kierkegaard that it is desirable that the reader end as a Christian.

How is he to explain that one may find a new starting point after one has despaired of everything?

He may, in the first place, point out a curious fact. He is convinced that he himself has made the transition from the Aesthetic to the Ethical without divine assistance. He was not aware of any such assistance and he is not quite sure what divine assistance is. He might admit to having had assistance of a sort but it would be only the assistance offered by his persistence as a self conscious individual.

There is nothing of divinity about the fact that one went on living after the possibilities afforded by a particular mood or stance had been exhausted. The need that one feels for a new mood, a new basis for action, may be all that is required for a new beginning. It might be observed that this felt need cannot itself be explained on the basis of what has gone before it. (This is the reason that the Aesthetic cannot be understood until Ethical understanding is achieved.) It may be held then that the move from the Aesthetic to the Ethical is a step that some people do in fact take and that it can be accepted, even though not fully theoretically explained, as such. Kierkegaard ends with a condition in which man cannot explain entirely by virtue of his own understanding in any case. Why, then, should the acknowledgment of the limitations of human understanding wait until the Religious has been postulated? What use is the inexplicable explanation for the failure of man's understanding, to a person who finds the divine teacher even more inexplicable? Such a person has first hand experience of the



finitude of understanding, but no first hand experience of God. For such a person the postulated impossibility of making a new start after having despaired of everything was not a problem. It is not because of sloppy or inexact thinking that it was not a problem, but simply that the solution to any such problems was already present in the day to day life of the person making the movement.

For such a person the suggestion in the Postscript that divine assistance is necessary is reasoning after the fact. It would appear that the Religious Man having embraced the paradox, is now seeking to magnify its importance by reading it back into all that has gone before. One might even attempt to criticize the Religious Man for turning something that was at least humanly familiar before into a mystification. Such claims for the role of the divine seem to spoil the simple descriptive value of the earlier presentation.

Another point of dispute would presumably be Kierkegaard's claim that when fear is lost through embracing the Ethical, edification is also lost.<sup>1</sup> The reply to this may be that there are at least two ways in which fear is not lost. Firstly, the Ethical Man in attaining the Ethical has had ample experience of fear. It is a vital part of his own personal history. It is presumably something he still has nightmares about from time to time. The recollection of this fear is one of the chief factors enabling him to concentrate his attention on the difficult tasks of the Ethical, which while never boring are usually commonplace and unromantic. Secondly, the Ethical tends to generate a sort of fear all its own. The demands it makes are difficult and

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<sup>1</sup> Postscript, p. 231.



Ethical failures are frequent. There is always the fear of failure to haunt the Ethical Man, while the fact of failure frustrates him. He wins his way with extreme difficulty, working at a task which continues as long as he lives. His universals are secure but his performance never is.

If complacency is the opposite of fear it would seem that the Ethical Man rarely, if ever, can be guilty of it. His battle is as much of the internal as the external, for he has himself as his task and every failure is a threat to that self.

The Religious Man has found all this too much to bear unassisted. The Ethical Man also finds it difficult but he has no hope of assistance. He must do the best he can with what he has. He may experience the pangs of despair but he always has his concrete self and his Ethical universals to return to. In this he is unlike the Aesthete in despair whose stage offers him no such support. For the Ethical Man some sort of alternative to outright profound despair remains. The Ethical may be unsatisfactory in some respects but it is difficult to see how it could come to seem empty when it is so risky, and in some sense so exciting. The excitement may not be self-justifying but it at least points up the internal importance of peaks in the individual's experience. Where there is excitement there is the possibility of enthusiasm, and where there is enthusiasm there is the will to persist in the face of extreme difficulties.

The Ethical Man who is unready to acknowledge the Religious has not experienced despair at the end of the Ethical in the way that Kierkegaard describes. His very scepticism as to the Religious renders it more unlikely that he will take the direction of despair. He will seek



to come to terms with his own limitations in an Ethical way, always remembering that in becoming himself more and more through the Ethical he becomes more and more capable in dealing with his own perplexities. Lack of perfection may haunt him but it does not destroy him. He is not entirely without resources when the stock taking comes at the end of the day.

Being thus prepared to face life he may seek to make use of Kierkegaard's description of the Aesthetic and Ethical Stages to urge others to become Ethical. He makes the judgment that the Ethical is better than the Aesthetic and is able to list the ways in which it has benefitted him. As is the case with Kierkegaard, he cannot make the requisite step for anyone else but he may be able to lead them to make it for themselves. He would wish to do this not merely for the selfish reason that it would make his own position more comfortable and satisfactory if others adopted his viewpoint, but also in the sincere expectation that others can benefit from the Ethical in the way that he has benefitted.

What does this sceptical Ethical Man do when confronted with the story of Abraham? This may well be the most serious sort of problem he has to face. In the interests of examining the question let us make it as difficult for this Ethical Man as possible. Let us assume that he is a close friend of Abraham and likes and respects him. Let us also assume that in some way he has become aware of what Abraham plans to do to Isaac? What can the Ethical Man do then? He would presumably feel it necessary to prevent the sacrifice of Isaac from taking place. This would mean restraining Abraham or removing Isaac from his care. This recalls the passage in the first book of Plato's Republic where it is



judged improper to return weapons to a friend who has gone mad (Steph. 331). Unlike the Platonic case, however, the Ethical Man will presumably be very reluctant to write Abraham off as mad. He may be troubled by the thought that if non-Ethical action is to be termed madness then a large number of able Aesthetes must also be termed mad--an unacceptable course of action. All attempts to talk Abraham out of sacrificing Isaac are bound to fail since Abraham's motive is beyond Ethical criticism--but the Ethical Man is unable to accept the contention that any action can be beyond Ethical criticism. As a result Abraham would probably wind up in a padded cell and the story of his descendants would differ little from that of a hundred other petty nomadic tribes.

Probably few people raised in the Western European cultural tradition would not experience a sense of loss when faced with such a possibility. We tend to be on Abraham's side. Did the Ethical Man act wrongly? Are there any excuses for him?

The Ethical Man may defend himself by saying that he is interested in propagating goodness as discovered in the Ethical Stage, not in cultural history. He may even admit that he too would feel culturally poorer without all that followed from Abraham's faith but that this is the area of the "interesting" and as such is sub-Ethical. He might even recall the ancient Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times". In short, he is faithful to his category and will not be diverted from it by cultural or historical concerns.

In his defence it may also be observed that had Abraham been our contemporary and had his purpose been detected he would also have been locked up and presumably been subjected to psychoanalysis as well. At least the Ethical Man has not had him locked up in response to the



demands of crude social norms and arbitrary prescriptive laws but rather for reasons he is able to explain. His position is--be good for the sake of the benefits that follow from goodness, not "Conform or be punished". Unfortunately it would be difficult for him to establish this to the satisfaction of a person outside the Ethical Stage. To the uninitiated the Ethical Man appears quite as curious a type as Abraham. The implications of the Ethical Stage demand a whole new set of social attitudes and a whole new understanding of social institutions (as was suggested at the end of Chapter I). The Ethical Man does have at least one advantage over the Religious Man. The transition he hopes to bring about in others is based on description and reason rather than paradox and hence should be more readily understandable.

The final defence of the Ethical Man's action is the standard one relating to the knowledge he had. Knowing that the sacrifice was to take place it was ethically incumbent upon him to prevent it. He acted to the best of his ability on the basis of the knowledge that he had and could hardly have been expected to do more.

The difference between this position as applied to the Ethical Man and as usually applied is discovered in the context of its application. Normally one is described as having done the best one could on the basis of the knowledge available--with respect to certain moral laws or rules. In the case of the Ethical Man these rules are a part of the task of ethically becoming a self. The outward expression relates to all men but specific demands or prescriptions are lacking. The Ethical Man recognizes the ethical demand as an integral part of himself and his situation. Thus it becomes impossible to treat his actions legalistically



and still respect his achievement in ethically becoming himself. Although the Ethical Man is vitally concerned with the outward expression of the Ethical it is an error to treat this outward expression of his as if that were all that it involved. It follows that the Ethical Man can understand a failure with respect to the Ethical universals, but cannot understand a success with respect to the Ethical universals as a failure with respect to something else. He cannot comprehend the postulated "teleological suspension of the ethical." As Kierkegaard says, the Ethical has its telos entirely within it.<sup>1</sup> Ethical attitudes are entirely rooted in the concrete self.

It should not be supposed that the Ethical Man is self centered in such a way that he becomes cold or inhuman. The opportunity for the outward expression of the Ethical still depends largely upon the presence of others. It is through others that the Ethical Man usually becomes aware of his all too frequent ethical failures. He is directly and humanly involved with others by virtue of his status as an Ethical Man. Marriage and friendship, two of Kierkegaard's examples of areas for ethical activity, are undermined if human warmth is lost.

All this does not remove the difficulties that the Ethical Man must face in attempting to deal with the Religious. It is quite true that for him Religious claims are incomprehensible, but men that he is inclined to respect keep making these incomprehensible claims. While he felt it necessary to restrain Abraham it is quite possible that he was reluctant to consider Abraham insane. It might be that he was familiar with Abraham's day to day conduct, his conversation, his family relationships, and his ability to meet and overcome difficulties. It might not

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling, p. 64.



be too much to suppose that he had a keen respect for Abraham's capacity for self analysis. When such a man involves himself in the incomprehensible rather than doubting him one may begin to doubt oneself. This seems implicit in Kierkegaard's development of Fear and Trembling.

Johannes De Silentio's attitude toward Abraham is clearly one of respect.<sup>1</sup> The fact that there are Religious men is a continuing difficulty for the Ethical Man.

At the intellectual level the Ethical Man may find ways to deal with the presence of Religious men. He may, for example, address the matter speculatively and adopt a position of agnosticism. He is certain of the Ethical, but does not know whether there is more than the Ethical or not. He is quite certain that should there be more than the Ethical, whatever that more may be it must be able to accommodate the Ethical. It would be unthinkable for the Ethical Man that his universals could be actually superseded.

Given this sort of analysis it might be possible for the Ethical Man to enjoy the company of Religious Men. He might achieve a relationship to some among them that closely resembles friendship, despite Kierkegaard's contention that agreement in life view is the absolute condition for friendship.<sup>2</sup> As long as no circumstance arose which led the Religious Men of his acquaintance to question or act in defiance of the Ethical universals the Ethical Man could continue quite happily.

Important difficulties arise, however, when such a challenge is made. The Ethical Man's relationship with Religious Men has for its

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Fear and Trembling, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 321.



foundation only a liberal speculative generosity. His real commitment is to the Ethical universals which he attempts to uphold consistently whenever action is required of him. This will lead him to a parting of the ways with his Religious associates whenever the Religious demands make for a suspension of the Ethical, for he cannot tolerate such a suspension. There is nothing underhanded about his conduct in this. At the speculative level his own being was not called into question. At the level of actual action it is. He cannot acknowledge the validity of the suspension without attacking the basis upon which he becomes himself. He may, then, indulge in a speculative agnosticism, but whenever the Religious demands an outward expression of the man-God relationship in such a way that it conflicts with the Ethical in its outward expression the Ethical Man is bound to oppose it. He cannot be agnostic where his own being is concerned.

It may be concluded, then, that the Ethical Man may be difficult to persuade to make the leap to the Religious level. Despite the serious challenges to his position that arise out of guilt, suffering, and pain, the Ethical Man still has considerable resources. The point of desperation is not so easily come to as at first might appear. The memory of the self's former condition in the Aesthetic Stage and the comparative success of the movement to the Ethical may make a man more ready to take the step into the Religious, or it may make him stubbornly reluctant to surrender any part of his very considerable achievement. The attitudes will presumably vary from individual to individual. Above all it is clear that the Ethical Man cannot be forced out of his position by argument alone. It seems that divine intervention of a very specific and personal sort is required. If this is the case then the leap from



the Ethical to the Religious is a very different sort of thing from the leap from the Aesthetic to the Ethical, and there is no reason to suppose that having made the earlier leap will be very much help in making the later one. The confrontation of the Ethical by the Religious has been spoken of, but in the final sense it seems that Kierkegaard cannot accomplish this but only suggest it. Only a direct divine act can properly create such confrontation.

The one weak point that remains for the Ethical Man, in the absence of direct divine intervention, is the presence of Religious men around him. This leaves him with a problem that he apparently cannot solve but must live with; thus giving a special sort of point to the insistence by men like Bonhoeffer on personal witness to the faith.



## CHAPTER III

### THE APPLICABILITY OF THE ETHICAL STAGE

#### (A) A Case for Examination

It is notorious that ethical writings, when viewed from a position of existential involvement, frequently exhibit a remarkable degree of insensitivity to real human needs. It seems advisable to construct an example of a possible situation requiring ethical analysis in order to test the materials extracted from Kierkegaard's works in the earlier parts of this thesis. There is no perfect test case to be used in these circumstances. Rather than try to build up a case embracing or attempting to embrace all man's ethical difficulties (a construct likely to be so complex and lugubrious that it would invite laughter rather than sympathy), it seems wise to examine a case which involves multiple interpersonal relationships and which is, in some degree, timely. Accordingly the following case based on the trade union movement is offered. It should not be supposed that the case presented is an account of the position of any actual person, although it does include aspects of several actual cases, together with some material invented by the writer for present purposes.

The Ethical Man in the case is a union organizer. He is a semi-skilled worker in a non-unionized industry; experienced and able, but easily replaceable by his employers. He is not, then, a professional organizer but has become one out of his concern for conditions in his



place of employment. He is forty years old, married, and has children. He has lived in the town in which he is employed most of his life. He owns a house, has friends at all levels in the firm that employs him, and in the community. He supports his parents. His income is barely sufficient for his needs. He has few savings.

Conditions in his place of employment are not good. Working conditions are poor for many of the men and both physically dangerous and unhealthy for some. The company practises unfairly discriminatory hiring procedures. The pay scale contains many inequities and is low in comparison with that of other firms in the same field. Fringe benefits are negligible. The company is certain to resist unionization. The workers are not in agreement over the form that an organized body representing them should take. Some resist the idea of unionization.

The organizer is an Ethical Man, but he is no paragon of virtue. He experiences the difficulties and failures of any fairly ordinary human being in trying to maintain his standards. It is not his success but the ordinary quality of his life that makes him a worthwhile case for study. On the surface there is little to distinguish him from a hundred other men in similar circumstances. The essential point about him, his Ethical commitment, is not open to public inspection. Once it is recognized, however, his uniqueness as an Ethical Man may be at least partially appreciated.

The problem that the organizer faces in this situation is whether to proceed with his attempts to organize his fellow workers.

The analysis which follows cannot be attributed to Kierkegaard. It is only an attempt to examine some of the principles that may be



extracted from his pseudonymous works. It should not even be assumed that Kierkegaard ought to agree with the analysis. It diverges from his intended goal in undertaking his project in indirect communication and, since this is the case, it might be of little interest to him.

#### (B) Ethical Relationships in the Case

The organizer is involved in all three of the areas of outward expression of the Ethical treated by Kierkegaard; marriage, vocation, and friendship. The analysis is to be oriented about these. In concentrating on these relationships there is no intention to reduce all possible Ethical relationships to these three. There is, for example, the employer-employee relationship which could well serve as an area for the outward expression of the Ethical. It seems, however, that there is an objective basis for the belief that even though these other relationships are taken seriously, priority is frequently given to the three that Kierkegaard chose to treat.

The organizer, as an Ethical Man, is happily married. He is not bored with his wife. They communicate freely and are in sympathy with each other's concerns. He recognizes that it is partly in virtue of her that he is what he is. The difficulties that they have had, and those that they have shared are a part of his own past that he accepts. He does not romanticize his relationship with his wife as he does not need to. He knows how much he owes her. At the same time he realizes that this relationship, however satisfactory, does not guarantee the sustenance of the individuals involved, nor is it the entire extent of their personal involvements. He feels a responsibility to provide her with the normal needs of a person in their society; not merely food,



clothing, and a home, but also a footing in the community in which they live. Much of the way in which this last consideration is to be dealt with depends upon her, but even that is seriously undermined if the position and activity of her husband is regarded with disfavour by the community, or even not readily identified by the community. Most recently married men quickly recognize the change in their status in the community which has come about through the fact of their marriage, and some come to realize the effect that their wives have upon the new status by virtue of their personalities, style, interests, and social attitudes. The community does slowly and gradually what business and industry do more obviously and directly: in taking account of a person they also take account of that person's spouse.

The organizer, then, realizes that if he carried on with his union work he may be risking his ability to support his wife, and at the same time destroying her footing in the community. On the other hand, she would undoubtedly be disappointed in him if he failed to act to the betterment of his own and his fellow workers' position when the opportunity offered. Worst of all, she might suspect that he had withheld action on her account. Should she feel that way, then his marriage is threatened, for such a suspicion is clearly an occasion for a breakdown of communication between them. Rather than providing him with a wife's support and assistance, she would draw back from the whole matter in fear of influencing him in an undesirable way.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn out of this matter is the obvious one. Although one can discuss the marriage relationship per se in actual situations it is not a closed relationship. It must be respected, but it must also take the other aspects of the



individual's activity into account. Far from being a criticism of Kierkegaard's analysis this appears to point up its possibilities. The relationship that one enters into when one marries is significant for one's approach to matters apparently having little to do with the relationship as such. In marrying, then, one approaches the world in a different way. Since the marriage relationship is a constant ongoing thing, it helps give stability to other relationships and activities. It may serve as a key to self-orientation for the married man. It is a part of the resources by means of which he faces the world. This is not to say that his wife is an instrument to him but quite the reverse. Because his relationship to her is constant and stable he is able to attain more constancy and stability in his other relationships.

This is not merely to say that all a man has to do is marry to see the world differently. In a trivial sense that is true, but it has no Ethical significance. The Ethical Man, in this case our organizer, chooses himself. This Ethical choice of the self clearly demands action consistent with the choice. In becoming an Ethical self the organizer must find a way of expressing his Ethical attitude. In a general way he comes into relationship with other men through sharing a common task (as represented by the universals) with them. On a direct personal level it is clear that there is another way in which he comes into relationship with other men. In this case he marries. A relationship is established between two people. As an Ethical Man in so doing he fulfills a universal, but the direct personal element remains along side the universal. It would be a descriptive error to lose sight of the particularity of a marriage while concentrating on the universal aspects. A marriage is both an expression of the universal and a particular in its own right.



The two aspects of the marriage are closely bound up together. The organizer must take account of both aspects in his commitment to his wife. In order to maintain the relationship it is not enough that he keep choosing as the universal requires. He must also be prepared to respect his wife's well-being and concerns in his actions. He is not free to ignore her footing in the community or her expectation that he will act in a publicly responsible way in the face of a difficult situation. Opportunity as an Ethical self demands responsibility, a limitation of possibility that gives rise to actuality.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, responsibility in this case is not responsibility to an abstract universal but to an individual in a complex actual situation which must be respected as a whole.

This observation is not intended as a criticism of Kierkegaard's "universals". On the contrary it is an indication of the non-abstract nature of the Kierkegaardian universal. The common tasks which all men share are not apart from their everyday concerns. The important thing is not exactly what is done but how it is done. As has been seen, for Kierkegaard this does not mean a crude subjectivism but is the key to free action and the choice between good and evil. This openness also means that actions having very particular characteristics may be fully and properly understood as fulfilling various universals. Here it seems we have a case where the problem of stating a general rule that has real applicability is overcome. Rather than the particularity of individual actions being a problem through their uniqueness, the very uniqueness involved still exhibits the universal. Without the particular the universal does not merely lack applicability, but without the particular

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<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 178.



Ethical Man is not Ethical Man. The possibility of choosing between good and evil is only significant when there are real choices to be made and actual choosing goes on. As Kierkegaard says: "The time in which the philosopher lives is not absolute time, it is itself a relative movement, and it always is a suspicious circumstance when philosophy is unfruitful."<sup>1</sup>

To summarize then: The organizer is an existing Ethical individual who expresses the Ethical mood in his marriage to a particular woman in particular circumstances. Since marriage is, as Ethically understood, a universal demand, in it he realizes the universal. In as much as it is a universal, in it he is related to all others presented with the demand. The particularity of this relationship sets him in a continuing relationship with his wife, but because this is the case he is also drawn into a special relationship with a limited group of people who are involved in the particular circumstances relating to his wife and himself as a married couple, as members of the community and so on. The self that marries is not an abstract self which is a number of things and is, aside from them, married. The self that marries ethically is a concrete self with many and varied concerns which affect and are affected by the marital relationship. It will be necessary to return to the matter of freedom and goodness shortly.

It has been stated that the organizer has children. The parent-child relationship was not examined very fully by Kierkegaard. His Judge William is a father and is fully aware that as such another important relationship is established. His responsibility toward them influences his attitude toward philosophy.<sup>2</sup> He also refuses to accept the suggestion

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<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 176.



that the perfect marriage is a childless marriage, (presumably presented on the assumption that a family unit containing only two members allows for the fullest Ethical faithfulness) on the ground that such a claim postulates the absolute independent being of the self, whereas the truth is that one becomes a self relatively in relation to others (in this case the child).<sup>1</sup>

It is in virtue of marriage that a man becomes a father and the head of a family; presuming once more that he is an Ethical man. This, perhaps, serves to clarify what was meant when it was said that the horizons of each partner in a marriage go beyond the other. Each has a special relationship to their children, and also in virtue of that relationship they relate to each other in another way. They are not only husband and wife, but also father and mother; collectively--parents.

In considering his problem the organizer must, then, take his children into account, firstly because of their importance for his relationship to his wife, and secondly because of his direct special relationship to them. It is, perhaps, easier to imagine exceptions to a universal worded "Have children" than to one worded "Marry". It may, however, also be understood as a common demand open to most people and through which most people may share a condition. This is another reason for taking children into account. They clearly present another Ethical possibility provided that having children is regarded as an Ethical and rational, rather than a simple biological, thing.

In continuing with his organizing ability, the man we are considering risks his ability to support his children properly, and also

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 176.



risks their footing in the community (which apparently may be more serious in the case of a child than in that of an adult). On the other hand he has the obligation of setting them an example. Should they feel that seeking safety at the expense of responsibility were the lesson taught by his example, it is possible that he might do them incalculable damage. Should they suspect him of cowardice he is then faced with the likelihood that his relationship with them will be disastrously altered, if not destroyed outright.

From this it may be seen that the original Ethical commitment, marriage, has led beyond the complexes built up around two people to include those in which their children are involved. This broadening is hopeful rather than alarming since it provides further opportunities for the external expression of the Ethical mood. It stands to reason that if in realizing the universal a man stands closer to other men, the more opportunities he has for such realization the more he is not merely the Ethical Man, but the more he is himself; always provided that he is able to meet the possibilities with a proper Ethical response. The starting point for all his relationships is a concrete self; the self chosen in moving to the Ethical Stage.

It has been observed that the organizer is supporting his parents. Having treated the parent-child relationship from one point of view already, it is hardly necessary to comment at length on this aspect of it. It is worth while to observe that old people are particularly sensitive to their status in the community and are inclined to be deeply troubled over the social embroilments of the younger generations.

All the relationships treated so far are the result of the marital-parental complex. All provide opportunities for the expression of the



Ethical mood. At the same time the organizer is involved in a particular way with far more than the half dozen or so people that he has direct commitments to. In virtue of his commitments to them he is also importantly involved with other people to whom they have commitments or involvements. It is not necessary, so it seems, that all the people involved should be Ethical. It is enough that the organizer has ethically established the relationships that give rise to these complexes of relationships. The vital starting point is the Ethical stance of the organizer. From this all the relationships derive their status. It is more the province of the sociologist than of the philosopher to trace the complexes of relationships arising from the position of the family group in the community. Such an inquiry would undoubtedly reveal relationships at many removes from the Ethical Man's original commitments as important for the social identity of the family group. Interesting as such studies might be they are not the significant thing for the understanding of the Ethical Man. The important thing is that it is his Ethical attitude which permits him to understand his community relationships and responsibilities. He understands his position in the community as a direct consequence of his choice of himself as Ethical.

It seems that the Ethical Man's relationship with his wife and children cannot be understood without following through with an assessment of the social involvement of the various individuals in the relationship. It is hardly possible to discuss marriage without recognizing the part the community plays. At the outset this may seem contrary to Kierkegaard's fulminations against mass activity and the popular mind.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As seen in The Present Age for example.



On the contrary, the community is not the mob. There is no suggestion that a viable community exists independent of the subjective recognition of truth in the Kierkegaardian manner. It seems possible, rather, to talk of a community the presence of which is only understood after the movement to the Ethical has made possible stable continuing relationships. The Ethical Man does not depend on the community so much as the community can only be really understood with reference to the Ethical Man. There appears then to be a useful basis for a concept of community without violation of the Kierkegaardian principles of the Ethical Stage.

This extrapolation is not, of course, Kierkegaard's, but it does seem implied by the social and civil position of Judge William. One may well assume that no man could function as a magistrate without a fairly clear concept of the community and his place in it. At the same time, however, it is clear that given Judge William's understanding of the Ethical, the customary concepts of community could not be taken over by him in an uncritical way. Kierkegaard has not treated this question for us so we can only extrapolate and speculate.

Mention of the Judge's position as magistrate raises the question of vocation. The organizer too has a vocation in the Kierkegaardian sense. One of the universals is: "It is every man's duty to have a calling."<sup>2</sup> No man can do another man's job but he can make his particular job express his Ethical mood. In his work, then, the organizer shares in the common task of humanity. He expresses the universal-human.<sup>2</sup>

As well as expressing the universal the organizer's work is productive. The fact that he is involved in the manufacture of a product

<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 296.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 297.



leads to a recognition of two other areas of special relationship: firstly to those who cooperate with him in producing the product, and secondly those who are affected by the product which he produces. The second set of relationships do not present many Ethical opportunities but they do serve to point up the fact that it matters what the Ethical Man produces. The product has an effect on society, and, despite the grey uniformity of much of modern industry, the Ethical Man's actual position can be seen to vary accordingly as to what he produces. The status of a man manufacturing atomic bombs is different from that of one manufacturing cosmetics; and both differ from that of a man producing agricultural machinery. It is quite true that any of the three can be produced by a man in an Ethical manner, but his very Ethical consciousness, so it appears, brings home the social effect of his product. He must live Ethically with the results of his earlier expression of the Ethical. At this level failure again becomes important. This point will be taken up shortly.

His relationship to those who cooperate with him in producing a product may be seen as coming within the range of the Ethical Man's vocational commitment. His whole vocational task is an expression of the Ethical mood--but in modern industry each man's task is closely keyed to the others. Part of his Ethical expression then must be in the form of relationships with his fellow workers. Since the fellow worker is not just a machine tending apparatus, the organizer finds the relationship extending beyond the simple functional one. Once again special relationships begin to emerge as soon as one undertakes to realize the universal. The two strands, special particular relationship and the common universal task, are united in the activity of the Ethical Man



repeating his choice of the Ethical in his everyday life. That he has chosen the Ethical form of self is the key point for his ethico-social activity.

Having established this point as background it seems reasonable to go on to the observation that it is not merely that a product is made available that is of interest to society, but also by whom, how, and when. This level of concern is indicated in many ways. An example might be the child labour laws now on the books in most countries. The organizer approves such legislation, not because the public mood demands it, but because of the conclusions he has reached in the practical expression of the Ethical mood.

The organizer, as an Ethical Man, is importantly involved in his vocation as it is through it, in part, that he is constantly becoming himself. At the same time modern industrial production can hardly be considered without recognition that it is a social activity in the general sense and cannot be abstracted from its community situation. The organizer is not then, on the one hand a working man and on the other hand, married. If the English language permitted the combination of words the organizer's position would be somewhat easier to express. On the basis of the material presented so far he is clearly a working-marriedparent. These multiple aspects are united in that they are expressions of the same Ethical mood.

It stands to reason then that the organizer cannot neglect his vocational responsibilities in favor of his family ones. Such a course would be self destructive and therefore damaging to the relationships he is attempting to preserve in giving them priority.

The organizer cannot, then, neglect the conditions of his work.



He is concerned not merely out of simple sympathy for his fellow workers, nor out of crude self interest. He is interested because an essential part of himself is involved and he realizes that if he fails in his vocational responsibilities he is a lesser man because of it. He might feel that it is wrong for his livelihood to be secured at the expense of physical danger to a fellow worker. He may feel that it is wrong to accept the advantage of profitable employment when it is denied to another man on account of color or ethnic origin. He may feel that it is wrong to accept employment which is robbed of its dignity by paternalism. On the other hand, he may draw back from the danger of interfering with the productive process. He may be reluctant to so act as to risk the livelihood of his fellow workers. The assessment of this situation can only be left with him. His decision in respect to it will be an Ethical one and he will be left to meet the results of that decision in an Ethical way.

It has been noted that the organizer has friends in all levels of the firm that employs him and in the community. In the light of Kierkegaard's observation that agreement in life view is the absolute condition for friendship<sup>1</sup>, it may be advisable to modify this statement somewhat. As a guide to interpretation of this point Kierkegaard further observes that friendship is not a random thing and cannot be based on vague feelings or sympathies.<sup>2</sup> It may be supposed then that the organizer has a few friends who conform to the Kierkegaardian friendship standard. They know each other well and understand their mutual

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 324.

<sup>2</sup>Loc. cit.



interests. Most of them are of the same age group and family situation. The relationship that the organizer holds to his friends is a clear, positive thing that both he and they value highly. The friendship situation, like the other relationships discussed, is an occasion for the outward expression of the Ethical mood by the organizer. Like the others it also leads to further relationships in virtue of the Ethical relationship first established. He has a special relationship, for example, to the family of a friend in virtue of the friendship relation. Friendship may be fragile at times, but is clearly a good opportunity for expression of a universal. Here again the relationship is not apart from the other relationships that the organizer maintains. It is another relationship by which he becomes the Ethical self that he has chosen.

The complex relationships which may follow on the Ethical friendship commitment can permeate the community. The organizer cannot, for example, overlook that fact that one of the management personnel that he will have to deal with is the son of a friend. It would be impossible to predict, without extensive knowledge, whether this fact is a help or a hindrance to him as organizer. It might, for example, be both personally embarrassing and a useful reminder that management is not simply "the enemy".

In all these points it is clear that the Ethical Man is most emphatically a social being. Whatever the conclusion reached by the organizer (and it would be presumptuous to attempt to reach it for him here) the proper expression of the Ethical demands a careful consideration of the social aspects of each point. In his Ethical expression the organizer's real field of activity is his community. He must keep



returning to the community, but at the same time the whole basis for his understanding of the community is rooted in his choice of the Ethical form of the self.

(C) Freedom, Opportunity and Failure

The organizer draws upon the Ethical mood for his whole set of social relationships; or at least attempts to. A key issue in his effort to realize Ethical Universals is the whole question of his freedom. Freedom and choice go together, but just as the choice made by the Ethical Man is somewhat different from what is usually understood by us, so the concept of freedom also differs somewhat from the customary. Perhaps the best way to describe the situation is to say that freedom is internalized. As required by Kierkegaard,<sup>1</sup> the organizer does not fall into the error of supposing that all possibilities are real possibilities for him. He knows that he became an Ethical Man through the specific acceptance of his whole aesthetic self, and remains one through the expression of the Ethical in particulars. He is limited by the actuality discovered in his concrete existential self. In order for many possibilities to be open to him the limiting actuality of his real self would have to be at a minimum. He knows that for all things to be possible for him he would have to be quite literally nothing. It seems that freedom can only function meaningfully when there is an actual free agent; and in so far as this free agent exists in a certain set of circumstances, freedom is always to be understood as within a framework. The organizer is not "condemned to" his freedom as it follows from his choice of the Ethical. If this account holds it would seem that the Aesthete

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<sup>1</sup> Fear and Trembling, p. 54.



who possesses little actuality, although appearances are to the contrary, may well be less free than the Ethical Man. It is the self that enjoys freedom and it is only in the Ethical that a man "chooses himself".

It seems reasonable to conclude that an opportunity for the outward expression of the Ethical is also an occasion for the exercise of freedom. The basis for both lies within the individual. Just as the universals are not realized without the outward expression, so freedom has significance only when exercised.

Taking one of the standard examples: The organizer in marrying involves himself with another. That he marries this particular woman is a limiting factor, but he must marry some particular woman or forfeit the opportunity for the outward expression of the Ethical provided by marriage. Speaking Ethically, it does not matter which particular woman he marries for any marriage may be seen as an occasion for outward expression of the Ethical. It appears at first that in marrying the organizer lost some of his freedom but only closed off certain possibilities. His real freedom is not diminished by this. The organizer freely chose to marry--that is, to undertake the realization of a certain universal. In doing so he opened up the possibility of an actual, free, outward expression of that universal (which, of course, remains with him as an ongoing task). Had he, on the other hand, neglected to marry he would have suffered a privation of freedom, lacking as he would certain occasions for exercising it. Freedom depends not on an opportunity for choice between simple alternatives at the same level, but rather on freely fulfilling a freely chosen absolute. Freedom comes with the basic choice of the Ethical self and remains a vital element in that this choice is constantly being repeated. Freedom, then, is basic to



the Ethical Man's approach to society.

Perhaps a further example will help to illustrate this point. The organizer's vocation has already been considered as a specialized social activity. Looking at it again in terms of opportunity may serve to point up the position of the self in relation to vocation.

Vocation is somewhat more difficult to discuss in terms of the possibilities that it gives rise to than marriage is. As has been indicated, it is always at least a minimally social thing. It must, however, be considered as "vocation as distinct from" as well as "vocation as a call to". Vocation joins one with others in as much as it is a universal to be realized, at the same time its particularity makes it a basis for setting the self apart from others. Perhaps the case of the organizer favors the present enquiry too much. A return to Kierkegaard for what is, perhaps, the extreme example may aid in weighing these two aspects of vocation.

This extreme case of vocation as a special and particular thing is monasticism. Kierkegaard's objections to monasticism are not based on the social nature of monasticism itself, but rather on the unacceptable assumptions of many of those who became monks.<sup>1</sup> He admits that monasticism can play an important dialectical role in Christianity<sup>2</sup> and regards it as pointless for Lutheran ministers to preach against it.<sup>3</sup> Monasticism as a vocation offers just as much to the Ethical Man as any other vocation. In it he may realize the universal. Kierkegaard is, however, inclined to suspect that many who chose monasticism in the past

<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> Journals, p. 222.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 391.



were not Ethically motivated, but chose it as a cheap and easy way to become something extraordinary.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that monasticism as a vocation does not cut the Ethical Man who practises it off from the rest of humanity. It is something that he can accomplish just as every man can accomplish his job. The nature of the vocation may separate the monk from most other men physically and appear to distinguish him from them in many other ways, but since it is a vocation it has a common character shared with other vocations, and, in fulfilling it, he is joining with the rest of humanity. Contrary to appearances the worthy monk has not given up his freedom but refocused it. The rule of his order, which may appear to others as restrictive, to him is an opportunity for the free expression of his faith. In it he is liberated from limitations commonly found in the lives of others and left free to perform his special functions. Furthermore, his rule informs him of his role in relation to the church and the community and thus allows him to relate more fully to others than might otherwise be the case. His freedom, then, is realized within the framework of his rule.

It is because the monk is a man that his vocation is seen as significant. Were he essentially different from all other men in some way his expression of faith could have no great significance for the rest of humanity who do not share in this special characteristic. In becoming a monk the man choosing that calling does not cease to be a man, but rather comes closer to achieving realization of himself through this universal than he was able to independent of it. The monk accepts

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<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, pp. 332,333.



his vocation as a particular individual for that is the only way in which he can accept it, but he is also of a kind and it is because this is so that the action is open to him as an individual. The monk then, as an Ethical Man finds both freedom and outward expression of the Ethical mood in monasticism as a vocation. If the monk may be thus found to be both a free agent in a significant sense, and also a social being, it seems that this must also be the case for the organizer.

This brief discussion of freedom in the Ethical Stage does little more than indicate the level at which one must begin to examine it, but this may be sufficient for present purposes as fuller discussion leads back into a discussion of the Ethical self and raises, in another way, materials already discussed. It would be well, however, to mention one further point of importance once again: the relationship of freedom and the good.

An understanding of this proposed connection depends upon the distinction under discussion above between the sort of genuine positive freedom possible for the Ethically involved, and open or uncontrolled freedom. Good and evil cannot be discussed, for Kierkegaard, at the level of uncontrolled freedom since both come into being through an act of the will.<sup>1</sup> Without stability in the individual willing them they have no meaning beyond the moment in which they are spoken; an unsatisfactory situation since this virtually reduced them to the level of a sneeze. Good and evil are only worthy of consideration if they have some extended applicability. Kierkegaard refuses to accept them as principles of thought on the ground that this extended applicability

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<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, p. 228.



cannot be supplied at a level in which all differences are relative (and this is the case with thought).<sup>1</sup> At the Ethical level the absolute basis for the distinction between good and evil comes in the absolute choice of the self; and this is the only choice that can be made absolutely.<sup>2</sup> Thus the self that is chosen is not just any self nor the circumstances of that self to be ignored, as has been seen earlier. The existence of good and evil then depends on an act of the will and has to do with the very being of the individual who chooses them. In dealing with good and evil in Kierkegaard then, it seems that we are dealing not with abstractions or formal definition, but with conditions. Good and evil are built into the Ethical Man's mood. The choice of the self as Ethical then is the keystone which not only provides for the unity of all the Ethical Man's experience at the interpersonal level, and for his understanding of himself, but also for the essential distinction between good and evil.

Kierkegaard also says ". . . this absolute choice of myself is my freedom . . ."<sup>3</sup>, and seems to build on this with the further statement "The good is freedom."<sup>4</sup> As was observed earlier, at this point it becomes very difficult to continue the analysis in a satisfactory way, yet it seems most desirable to say something about how the organizer in the case for examination is to treat questions about good and evil. The following suggestion is put forward tentatively. There is no point in our organizer puzzling over such questions as "Is it good to realize

<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> The Concept of Dread, p. 99, footnote.



the universal?" or "Is it good to realize this particular universal?". There appears to be no answer to either question outside the observation that the good is part and parcel of his whole task of becoming his freely chosen Ethical self. This disposes of the first question as already dealt with in becoming Ethical, and suggests that, in the second case, there is no "outside" standard of good and the choice must be made in the light of the Ethical Man's understanding of what best serves the furtherance of the whole task. From this it may be seen, as one might have already suspected, that the organizer is in a difficult and socially dangerous position. He cannot trust to common opinion in making his choice as to whether to continue his union activity. Commonly accepted priorities need have nothing to do with what is best for him, although in assessing what is best for him he must take into account the likely effects of flying in the face of the common standards. He must consider social norms then, but only in the course of coming to a decision in terms of the higher demands of his Ethical task.

Given such standards it appears that while the organizer endures failures frequently, not all of his failures need be Ethical failures. An Ethical failure is a failure with respect to his whole task of realizing himself Ethically. If he stops off at the tavern and gets drunk on Saturday night he has not failed Ethically if his excess alcohol content does not significantly affect his task of becoming an Ethical self. The local W.C.T.U. may regard it as a failure of the first magnitude whereas the organizer's regrets may only be over the headache he has on Sunday morning. In many matters of custom and law he may fall short of the common standard and yet be an Ethical Man, always remembering that he must live with the social consequences of his activities.



The Ethical area itself leaves enough real difficulties for the organizer without troubling himself about non-Ethical failures such as the foregoing. The Ethical demands perfect participation in the whole and perfection in oneself.<sup>1</sup> When it is remembered that the Ethical choice of the self is an ongoing thing, and that the outward expression of it is also dependent on ongoing choices, frequent failures will be expected. Every Ethical relationship demands perfect performance. The demand does not recognize the difficulties under which it must be carried out. It seems that the organizer must be the perfect husband, the perfect father, the perfect son, the perfect worker, and the perfect friend. The proper outward expression of the Ethical demands it. Now even assuming that the organizer is constant in his inwardness, it is clear that in the case under consideration these various capacities may involve conflicting demands and are, indeed, almost certain to. Since this is the case his observance of each relationship may be less than perfect as a result of the demands of the others. The demand is made of him that he be perfect, but there is no guarantee that the external complex of situations can be entirely reconciled. As a result, any choice that leads to a success in one area is likely to do so at the expense of another. Furthermore, although the choices should favor the whole task the organizer has no way of grading his performance. He can never console himself with the thought that although he is not the perfectly Ethical man he is at least 86 percent successful or anything of the sort. He can never escape from at least some sense of failure.

The inward failures of the organizer are more serious. The chief

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<sup>1</sup> The Concept of Dread, p. 26.



difficulty is that of constantly choosing his Ethical self. While Kierkegaard took elaborate care to indicate that the Ethical does not destroy the Aesthetic as the Aesthetic is given back in it at a new level,<sup>1</sup> there remains the temptation to lapse into purely Aesthetic attitudes. It would be too much to hope that the organizer is able to withstand all such temptation. Perhaps, influenced by popular taste and seduced by the wiles of Detroit, he buys a new car and in doing so endangers the financial status of his family. Perhaps, worse yet, he is momentarily convinced that the ownership of such a machine will make him into a better man, more interesting, more influential, and more important. It would be hard not to forgive him so common a lapse, particularly considering how carefully the lapse has been connived at by the automobile hucksters. Nonetheless it is clearly an unfortunate deviation from the high standards demanded by the Ethical. He might say that he lost his grip on himself, considering the matter later in a coolly reflective moment. The term is a good one. It is precisely "himself" that he lost for a time.

Temptation is not the only occasion for failure. It is clear that maintaining the choice of the self calls for a single mindedness that few men can claim. At times one becomes tired. Pressures of work, financial concern, ill health and many others may shake a man's ability to carry on. There is a temptation from within to "opt out" of the Ethical; to return for a time to a spectator position. This may be done under cover of personal reassessment or some such thing, but should the organizer attempt such a thing it seems likely that he will

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<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 230.



have a pretty shrewd idea of what he is really doing, and his ongoing commitments will remind him before long that he cannot evade the Ethical demands. Once again though, he has failed and he is certain to know it. Since the Ethical requires outward expression this same outward expression will serve to remind him of his failures. Furthermore, since the task of becoming his Ethical self is co-extensive with his lifetime he cannot look forward to a time when he can rest from it. Perhaps, even if he resists despair, it is understandable if he feels at times that the Ethical is somewhat like a treadmill even though he does not suffer from the boredom which faces the unfortunate Aesthete.

It is difficult to make a man chosen as an example very human. One really needs the gift of a novelist to bring the character to life as a living man, for it is the livingness which is vital and it is what is missing in such accounts as this one. It would, however, be too much to attempt to map the emotional life of the Ethical Man in the space available, and it is, perhaps, unnecessary to do so for present purposes provided the reader is prepared to accept the assurance that the organizer is not deficient in this respect. A satisfactory treatment of the subject, would, in any case, require a careful investigation of Kierkegaard's psychology--a very considerable undertaking in itself. One aspect of this is, perhaps, worth commenting on; the quality of sympathy, particularly since Kierkegaard's comments on it appear in the relatively little discussed "Observations About Marriage" in The Stages on Life's Way. This material appears in an appendix.



## CONCLUSION

Realization of the universal is a major demand of the Ethical, whether one is following Kierkegaard's full development of the stages or not. It is to be noted that all the examples of outward expression of the choice of the Ethical self depend for their character on the presence of at least one other person. Marriage depends on the partner, friendship on the friend, and vocation on a complex pattern of social relationships. Were this not the case the term "Ethical" would not be appropriate for the stage under discussion. It is true that the Ethical man is not positing anything outside himself as essential to his choice of himself, but in a general way all external expressions of it involve others, and involvement with others favours the enterprise of choosing the self as concrete.

It might be observed that Aesthetic Man could live quite comfortably in a world in which he was the sole living being. The only disadvantage he would encounter would be the narrowing of the base of popular taste upon which so much of his activity is founded. The Ethical Man, on the other hand, would experience serious difficulties, not merely because of the limitation of the possibilities for outward expression of the choice, but also because the support and assistance of Ethical commitments in relation to others would have been withdrawn. It is difficult to imagine the Ethical Man apart from interpersonal relationships. As Kierkegaard himself says, the self which is chosen in the Ethical Stage is not merely



personal, but social and civic.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to make too much of certain points in Kierkegaard's work, such as his criticism of the public tendency to band together "in cases where it is an absolute contradiction to be more than one."<sup>2</sup> Such a point, taken out of context, conveys something far more rigid and extreme than is revealed on the larger view. One such error is equating Kierkegaard's term "religious" with "a barren and isolated will",<sup>3</sup> This interpretation is rendered at least doubtful in the consideration of Kierkegaard's view of the Ethical Man as "civic" taken together with his contention that when one moves from one stage to the next, the content of the earlier stage is given back, but "dethroned".<sup>4</sup>

The self as chosen is always primary for Kierkegaard. The Ethical Man cannot sink his identity in common experience with a crowd. If one must cease to be the self that is chosen in order to be one of a group, then joining such a group is contrary to the demands of the Ethical. In ruling out such involvement in externals at the expense of the self Kierkegaard is clearly not denying the possibility of interpersonal relationships. One does become involved with others, but on the basis of a concrete self constantly coming to be rather than through direct identification with externals.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> S. A. Kierkegaard, The Present Age, trans. A. Dru (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Arland Ussher, Journey Through Dread (London: Darwen Finlayson Ltd., 1955), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 230.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 267.



There is an obvious way in which all men, Ethical or otherwise, are socially involved. An individual, simply by being born, is immediately in a relationship which can be understood in terms of Ethical possibility. Until this particular sort of possibility is recognized, however, this matter of simply being born may seem rather trivial and commonplace. It is, in fact, commonplace, but for the Ethical Man it is far from trivial. As a man goes through life he acquires a constantly increasing range of possibilities of this sort. Simply by being what he is he has a dialectical role in relation to others. The Aesthetic Man, since he is merely fortuitous, plays a very imperfectly dialectical role from the Ethical point of view. The Ethical Man, by constantly becoming the self which he has chosen, is vastly more important to others whether he is physically present or absent. For other selves, the Ethical Man always makes a difference.

Kierkegaard emphasizes the individual; but for him there also are individuals. This is only fully and properly recognized through exercising Ethical choice. The presence of others is a limitation, but of the sort that gives meaning and content to freedom. Hell, for Kierkegaard, is most certainly not other people.

It seems that what Kierkegaard says of spiritual love may be applied to interpersonal relationships in general for the Ethical Man. They are constantly opening themselves more and more, and ever extending themselves to include more and more persons.<sup>1</sup> For Kierkegaard the highest achievement of spiritual love is in loving all.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Ethical Stage provides the opportunity, in theory at least, for the Ethical Man to relate himself

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<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, Vol. II, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.



to the whole of humanity.

At this point speculative interpretation begins to sound like a vague and ill-defined humanism. It is, in fact, a humanism of a sort but it is neither vague nor ill-defined. At the outset all Ethical activity belongs within existential categories. This means that while the possibilities point toward a social perfectionism, human limitations are not forgotten. It is always the Ethical Man as an existing individual who is working in the direction suggested. There is no suggestion that he is, himself, a perfectly Ethical or social being at all times and in all circumstances. The possibility of relating to the whole of humanity in this way, however remote it may be for him, serves to underline the importance of realizing the Ethical universals. Whenever a universal is realized the man who realizes it is relating to all men in a less than total but similar way. The final possibility also serves particularly to remind him of his fellow condition with all other men. The possibility is not unique to him, but common to all men. The significance of the possibility of relating in this way, then, does not depend on a doctrine of the ultimate actual perfection of all men, but rather on the common nature of the task that is set for all men whether they succeed or not. It is not so much that all men end in the same position, though this may appear to be so, but rather that they can all make the same sort of beginning.

It is noteworthy that, for Kierkegaard, the Ethical is always stated in terms of the ordinary. The activities of the Ethical Man in relation to his surroundings are those of any more or less average individual. Since the Ethical is concerned with the common task it is clear that no special talent, no minimum amount of capital, and no special degree of intelligence are held to be prerequisites for it. It is no accident then



that the discussion offered in Chapter III of this thesis was concerned with comparatively dull, commonplace, matters. The interesting and spectacular is the province of the Aesthete. The Ethical is largely occupied with matters enshrined in the good grey tradition of conventional wisdom. The deceptive point is that this conventional wisdom is radically transformed by the action of Ethical choice.

There seems to be a general assumption that Kierkegaard, despite the fact that he gave birth to a new direction in philosophy, was an arch conservative entirely out of step with the revolutionary times in which he lived. One may cite the Journal entries for 1848 in support of this position. They are almost entirely concerned with his inner experiences; particularly his experience during Holy Week. His main reaction to the events of that year seems limited to the fact that he lost money on a royal bond issue, and was annoyed that his man-servant had been conscripted.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to see how Kierkegaard can be written off so easily as a political and social conservative with little new to offer in these areas when, underlying his conservatism, lies such a set of powerful and unconventional concepts. If he is to be termed a conservative, he is a conservative with a difference.

It may be said that much of the real merit of Kierkegaard's treatment of the Ethical Stage stems from the unexceptional nature of the activities envisioned as taking place in terms of it. It is, above all, accessible. It was not Kierkegaard's intention to replace traditional social relationships (perhaps wisely as there are few reasons to suppose that workable alternatives would be any improvement in any case), but rather to transform

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Lowrie, Kierkegaard, in 2 vols. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1952), Vol. II, p. 392, 393.



them by changing the basis on which they rest. His project in persuasion leads ultimately to the Religious, but it seems that the transformation of the self in such a way that old relationships gain a new meaning may be accomplished before the final Stage is introduced. There is admittedly a lack of personal witness in support of this point, but it may be argued that Kierkegaard planned his project of indirect communication well and that there is nothing very curious about adopting this new basis independently of accepting the Religious Stage. This appears, after all, to be what Kierkegaard expected the interested reader following the proper sequence of the pseudonymous literature to do. Surely what may serve as an interim position in one descriptive system may be made to serve as a final position in another.

In this thesis an attempt has been made to clarify and, in some degree, systematize Kierkegaard's Ethical Stage. An effort has been made to demonstrate that the contents of this stage have a significant degree of applicability independent of the ends which Kierkegaard intended.

Clarification and systematization of Kierkegaard's writings is always a dangerous undertaking. Firstly, Kierkegaard never wished his works to become a matter of philosophic debate. His whole pseudonymous literature is carefully framed in such a way as to make its reduction to the level of one quasi-objective philosophical system among others as difficult as possible. Secondly, whenever clarification and systematization are undertaken with other ends than those of the original author in mind, there is always the danger that the contents of the work will be edited, consciously or unconsciously, to suit the new ends. The writer of the present thesis sincerely hopes that such materials as are attributed to Kierkegaard have been accurately presented and given due weight.



Thirdly, the presentation of such material as these in a systematized form may tempt the reader to treat the pattern which emerges as something which can be used as a formula to produce certain predictable results. This is not the case. The material is presented not for application but for appropriation by the reader. It is intended that the categories presented in the systematization be respected in its interpretation by the reader.

The effort to consider the Ethical Stage independent of the ends intended by Kierkegaard depends for its merit, as does Kierkegaard's original presentation, in its being descriptively convincing. One difficulty in this respect is the inability of the writer to explain away the presence of religious individuals in the community. It seems that the only way that this situation can be dealt with is to appeal to the fact that, while the religious individuals remain and are disconcerting, the Ethical Man is able to make a reasoned public defence of his position while the religious individuals are not since their categories involve non-public factors. The Religious Man cannot discuss his position with the unconverted in the same way that the Ethical Man can.

The effort to indicate the independent value of the Ethical Stage for understanding social relationships is, at best, a suggestion of a line of approach. It would be impossible to give an exhaustive analysis of social relationships within a suitably brief space. Furthermore, the nature of such an analysis would almost certainly cut across disciplinary lines and involve considerations beyond the scope of purely philosophical criticism. In this connection it might be noted that relatively little use has been made in this thesis of Kierkegaard's The Concept of Dread. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, it is the opinion of the writer of this thesis that significant parts of the above work involve detailed



consideration of technical psychological materials which would demand a complex analysis of Kierkegaard's psychology. Such analysis would require the inclusion of a large body of material distinct as to subject matter from the central themes of this thesis. In the space allowed for the latter this is clearly impractical. Secondly, the writer of the thesis admits that he is insufficiently adept at primary psychological analysis to attempt such an undertaking without prohibitively long and detailed preparation. Inasmuch as the expansion of the suggestions contained in this thesis may require such analysis, it is to be hoped that suitable suggestions may be forthcoming from specialists in the area.

The Ethical Stage offers certain advantages to anyone interested in constructing a purely secular ethical and social approach. It suggests a way of linking freedom and the good. It offers a stable concept of the self. It humanizes the usually very inhuman and abstract concept "humanity". It allows for the contemplation of political and social change without appealing to "progress" theories. It is to be hoped that these aspects of Kierkegaard's thought may prove fruitful even for those who are unable to follow him into the Religious Stage. Certainly there is an open possibility for the formulation of positive social attitudes founded on some of the principles to be found here. It is a curious circumstance that so few of Kierkegaard's modern heirs have put forward positive social concepts.

The relationship of the Ethical Stage to the contemporary ethical debate is somewhat curious in itself. The Ethical Stage does not resolve any of the usual tangles and difficulties which emerge from moral discussion. At most it indicates an alternate approach which may render some questions unnecessary but which gets rid of few of them by means of direct



answers. It is very modern in its refusal to follow blind theoretical alleys, and its insistence on the examination of the actual circumstances of human involvement in ethical matters. It remains to be seen what help it may be in clarifying concepts in this area, and what actual practical applications it may have.

One may well wonder what part Kierkegaard's enthusiasm for Greek thought played in the formulation of his ideas on the Ethical Stage. He seems to have firmly adhered to the idea that a man is vitally and essentially involved in his community. Perhaps the results of this belief may serve as the basis for a modern view of man as a responsible agent within the framework of an integrated society.



## APPENDIX

### Kierkegaard on Sympathy

In "Observations About Marriage" Kierkegaard observes that a man without sympathy is not worth talking about.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard has not mentioned any such point in this way before, yet in it he suddenly insists on sympathy as "an essential quality of man".<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing very surprising about this insistence on sympathy when the nature of Kierkegaard's undertaking is remembered. Given the aim and expected audience of the pseudonymous authorship it is readily understood that Kierkegaard began with a basis of common understanding and changed it only in so far as it suited his project to do so. Sympathy as a human quality is assumed as something commonly recognized until Kierkegaard thinks it worthwhile to make special comment. Wherever this quality may appear in the account of the stages it is clear that it is clear that it is part of Kierkegaard's stock-in-trade--a basic assumption, along with the accompanying assumption of imagination in the reader, which makes the whole undertaking a promising one.

In the Ethical Stage the man who lacks a positive relation to the temporal has no outlet for his sympathy; a condition which leads to unhappiness and frustration.<sup>3</sup> A positive relation to the temporal is attained

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<sup>1</sup> Stages, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Loc. cit.



through Ethical choice.<sup>1</sup> As an example, the "resolution of marriage" is productive of "a good understanding with the temporal".<sup>2</sup> It is the Ethical Man then who is best able to fulfil himself, and this fulfilment comes by way of the outward expression of his Ethical choice. The choice and its outward expression are not finally separate. The first is abstract and the second concrete, but the concretion is referred to as the "essential expression".<sup>3</sup>

In this case a human quality is allowed its proper range through ... the adoption of the Ethical Stage. Presumably an analysis of the quality would lead to useful conclusions as to the ways in which it could be satisfied. Since sympathy is a quality that arises out of man's relationship with externals, the ways by which it could achieve adequate expression would be of great interest to anyone attempting to understand the social position of Ethical Man. Kierkegaard, however, confines himself to the vital point of the basic importance of Ethical choice for the expression of sympathy and leaves it to the reader to follow up the theme as he wills.

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<sup>1</sup> Stages, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 118.



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